FAY ARLINGTON

ANNE BEALE

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‘A woman in the snow, sir.’—*Page* 221.

FAY ARLINGTON

BY

ANNE BEALE

AUTHOR OF 'SIMPLICITY AND FASCINATION,' 'GLADYS THE REAPER'
'NOTHING VENTURE NOTHING HAVE,' 'THE PENNANT FAMILY'
'ROSE MERVYN,' 'THE MILLER'S DAUGHTER,' ETC. ETC.

> 'Her eyes as stars of twilight fair;
> Like twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
> But all things else about her drawn
> From May-time and the cheerful dawn;
> A dancing shape, an image gay,
> To haunt, to startle, and waylay'
>
> WORDSWORTH

LONDON
GRIFFITH FARRAN OKEDEN & WELSH
NEWBERY HOUSE, CHARING CROSS ROAD
AND SYDNEY

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FAY ARLINGTON.

CHAPTER I.

SIR GILBERT OREBURN, BARONET.

'ARE you sure that all is ready, Mrs. Stokes?' said Mr. Butterfield, steward of Oakwoods Court.

'As sure as sure can be, sir, considering the short notice,' replied its housekeeper.

'The notice is short because the family wish to return privately,' remarked the steward.

'Yes, sir; but it flurries a person with a tendency to hossifaction of the heart to be hordered to have this great place ready in a few hours—and when I'm hurried I'm flurried.'

'I told you of Sir Gilbert's letter weeks ago, Mrs. Stokes.'

'True, sir; but there have been so many during the time as I have taken care of the Court, that I didn't believe in it. Besides, I hexpected the servants first, and a housekeeper as would precede me, as ham but a sort of a charwoman, though a cook by profession.'

'It is natural that Sir Gilbert should wish to return quietly, after twenty years' absence,' said Mr. Butterfield.

'He didn't use to be so quiet, sir. I remember when he drove a coach and four through the village.'

'Years bring wisdom. I hope no one knows that he returns to-night.

'How should they, sir? The masons and carpenters went away the day before yesterday—leaving everything in a muddle, as they always do. They let the water in, then put a patch o' deal or mortar over the leak, and go off somewhere else. And the villagers be so much afeerd of the old Sir Gilbert's ghost that they never come near the place.'

'Nonsense, Nancy Stokes, nonsense! You know all about that ridiculous mystery.'

Mr. Butterfield walked hastily out of the great kitchen, in which the above conversation was held, and Mrs. Stokes went into the yard, muttering,—

'Nancy Stokes, indeed!—what next, Benjamin Butterfield? I'll circumbend you yet. To come home, and no bonfires, no cheering, no bells,—no nothing! Not if I can help it. Tommy!—where be'y, Tommy?'

The last words were answered by a boy, who came from a neighbouring office.

'Go you and watch for the carriage, Tommy. When it comes under the big hoaks, in the havenue, run to Uncle Jim, and tell him to give the Squire a peal.'

'All right, mother,' said Tommy, whose black eyes and sharp features looked preternaturally acute in the gloaming.

Mrs. Stokes returned to the kitchen, lighted a candle, and proceeded to go through the sitting-rooms of the large place, of which she was sole occupant. She was a broad, stout, short-necked woman, of waddling gait, red complexion, and sandy hair. There were good-humour and cunning in her greenish eyes, and resolution in her pursed-up mouth. She was voluble enough to know the value of silence—indiscreet enough to prize discretion; so she had acquired a habit of talking to herself, to indemnify herself for much forced reticence. She continued her soliloquy as she rolled through the rooms:

'I might rub away all my helbow-grease, and never make this old furniture shine. Here's the hoshair coming through these red leather dining-room chairs, and the moths have got into the curtains; there isn't a bit o' Turkey left in the carpet, and there would be no shine on the hoak but for my helbows. As to the staring picturs and cedar-wood ceiling, I was afeerd to touch 'em. Here's a drawing-room! Satin chairs and sofers all faded, and nothing cheerful but one's own figure in them great looking-glasses. Well, I be a sight, as brother Jim says. 'Tis bad enough to *be* oneself, much more to *see* oneself. The library's damp, and the books mildewed. How was I to wipe thousands o' volums, stuck together like Siamese twinses? It hain't no joke to get this big place ready all by oneself—to light the fires, make the beds, find the linen, kill the chickens and dress 'em, bake the cakes (I wonder I didn't let 'em burn, like the king I heerd of), lay the cloth, as I was a whole day finding—But here's Benjamin Butterfield again! Mum, Nancy Stokes! 'Tisn't for want of a tongue that a hox don't speak.'

Mr. Butterfield came into the library. He was a lawyer, of middle age, who had been agent at Oakwoods for forty years or more. He had penetrating grey eyes, a grey beard, a bald head, and a shrewd, grave manner. There was a certain dignity about him which imposed on all over whom he was vicegerent, with the exception of Mrs. Stokes, who was, as she expressed it, 'hindependent of the steward.'

'I hope they will not disappoint us. Mrs. Arbiter says they will certainly be here to-night,' he remarked.

'Do you mean to say, sir, that Harbiter's with the family still? Then they must have had a life of it. Hark! here they be! I'm sure I hear wheels.'

They both hurried into the hall, in time to see a fly and pair pull up.

'Welcome home, Sir Gilbert,' said the steward emphatically, opening the fly door, while Stokes again retreated in search of light.

'How d'ye do, Butterfield? Glad to see you once more. This horrible fly has cramped us to death,' came in reply from the vehicle.

Sir Gilbert Oreburn, Baronet, stepped out into the darkness and shook hands with his steward.

'My daughters, Butterfield—but you cannot see them. A dark, if not a cold, reception. Elinor, this is our old friend.'

A tall girl got out of the carriage and placed her hand in the steward's, saying quickly,—

'My sister is faint; we must carry her to her room at once.'

A woman, who had got off the box, came forward, with a hasty 'How do you do, sir?' then went into the fly.

Stokes brought a light, which enabled this person, aided by Sir Gilbert, to lift out some sort of limp figure, about which fell a mass of golden hair.

'May I carry her up-stairs?' said the steward, and a young girl, with a white face and closed eyes, was placed in his arms.

He bore her through the huge hall and up the broad staircase, followed by the women. Sir Gilbert was arrested on the threshold of his mansion by a question from the driver of the fly concerning the luggage, to which he replied, in a voice half despondent, half indifferent,—

'Mr. Butterfield is master here; he will tell you when he returns. I really know nothing. Is there *no* one who can help?'

'Yes, please, sir—please, my lord—please, my baronet,' said a voice, and Tommy crept from behind a screen in the distance.

'Pray approach. Whom may I have the honour of addressing?' asked Sir Gilbert, stepping into the hall.

'I be Tommy, please, sir. Shall I call Uncle Jim, please, my baronet?' said the boy, feeling his way towards Sir Gilbert.

'By all means. But why do you call me "my baronet"?'

'Mother said you wasn't a lord, but a baronet, please, sir,' was Tommy's reply; at which Sir Gilbert Oreburn laughed gently, and said, 'Very amusing.'

Mr. Butterfield appeared with a light, and Tommy vanished in search of Uncle Jim.

'Well, Butterfield, you have got us home at last,' began Sir Gilbert pathetically. 'Our coachman waits for orders—our footmen are—well, never mind—our groom is doubtless in the stables. You must officiate to-night in these new capacities, having worked so long and perseveringly in the old. Where have they put Aimée?'

'In her ladyship's rooms, Sir Gilbert. They looked the brightest, and you ordered'—

'Yes, I remember,' interrupted the baronet. 'Is she better?'

'Mrs. Arbiter says she is recovering, Sir Gilbert.'

'You see we have still our Juno Regina, Butterfield. Arbiter speaks, and we believe.'

At this juncture, a man, in working dress, appeared shouldering a box, followed by Tommy with a portmanteau.

'Leave the luggage in the hall for the present,' said Mr. Butterfield. 'Won't you come into the dining-room, Sir Gilbert?'

'Gladly, if there is anything to eat; or perhaps a paucity of provisions accompanies a paucity of domestics?'

'I had no time to procure servants, Sir Gilbert. The notice was short.'

'Ah! we decided, as usual, at the eleventh hour,' said Sir Gilbert, sauntering lazily into the dining-room, while his steward followed, shrugging his shoulders, uplifting his eyes, and muttering, 'Just the same as ever!'

'Hogarth's *Mariage à la Mode*, without the lady in curl-papers,' laughed Sir Gilbert, as he saw Mr. Butterfield's face reflected in a large mirror. 'What an odour of steaming potatoes!'

'Quite hot, sir—welcome home, sir!' exclaimed Stokes, who was placing covers on the table. 'Everybody's as glad as glad can be, sir,' she added, with irrepressible enthusiasm.

'Except, perhaps, the chief actor in the play, who is sometimes dejected while the ballet and chorus dance and sing,' remarked Sir Gilbert, fixing a glass that hung from his neck into his eye, and looking at Stokes. 'But I am truly grateful for—warmth—and—cold chicken. It is cold, is it not?' he added, glancing at the table.

'Hi wasn't sure hof the hour hof your harrival, sir, so I cooled 'em,' said Stokes, taking commendable pains with the h's, as she curtseyed and disappeared.

'Is that our housekeeper?' asked Sir Gilbert. 'I have seen women and women, but none so refreshingly perfect in the aspirates. Having none, or at least few, on the Continent, they sound almost musical. Ah, Elinor, you have missed the head of our establishment!'

These last words were addressed to his eldest daughter, who came in as Stokes went out. She was a tall fair girl, in travelling-dress, and as she approached, Mr. Butterfield said,—

'She is an Oreburn, Sir Gilbert.'

'In person, not intention, Butterfield,' replied her father. 'She is a perfect encyclopædia of economy.'

She went up to the steward with a sort of shy grace, and apologised for not having spoken to him properly when they met; 'but,' she added, 'everything gives place to my sister's attacks. She has recovered now, and I am told by Arbiter to come to dinner. I am so very glad to see you, and to visit our native land.'

She put both her hands into Mr. Butterfield's, who looked at her approvingly.

'I am truly thankful to welcome you home, Miss Oreburn,' he said, and his voice trembled. 'I had forgotten the driver,' he added hastily, and left the room.

Miss Oreburn went to her father and kissed him.

'Dear father,' she said, 'this is delightful! But how large it all is! Aimée and I are bewildered. Yet we are so happy to be here. Are you not also glad to be at home?'

'Glad? Let me consider,' replied Sir Gilbert. 'Butterfield looks old, the Court shabby, the housekeeper vulgar; no, I cannot be glad. And we have not yet encountered the parson and his flock; not been called upon; not been stared at; not been canvassed; not been dunned; not been bored. We went abroad to retrench, *ma fille;* you have now brought me home to retrench. Let us eat to-night and be thankful. Allow me to be the first to give you your proper place at the head of this festive board.' They were standing by the fire, and Sir Gilbert playfully offered his arm.

'We should scarcely see one another by these dim lights, the table is so large,' said his daughter. 'Let us sit side by side, as near the fire as is possible.'

So they seated themselves; and while Sir Gilbert Oreburn draws the chicken towards him and begins to carve, we may venture to describe him.

He is not much over forty, and young-looking for that age. His brown curly hair and moustache scarcely show a grey thread, and his tall slight figure is graceful and easy. His face puzzles us, for it is difficult to discover from the half satirical, half comic, and occasionally grave expression of his blue-grey eyes and flexible mouth, whether he is gay or serious, displeased or pleased, disgusted or amused; just as it is impossible to tell, from his partly classical, partly playful, and wholly careless conversation and manner, whether he is happy or unhappy, bored or delighted.

His eldest daughter, Elinor, is like him in feature but not expression. She has the deep blue-grey eyes, dark eyebrows, straight nose, mobile mouth, and graceful figure of the Oreburns; but her smile is rather sad than sarcastic, and her manner rather decided than enigmatical, though a certain reserve marks her general bearing. It is in part due to her persistent entreaty, aided by the steward's representations, that her father has consented to return home, after a score of years of voluntary absenteeism. These have been spent abroad, where his daughters were born; and where his only son, now in America, was brought up.

'These chickens were not hatched yesterday,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Aimée will surely rebel at this very untoward wing. We must get that mysterious work, "Our Farm of Four Acres," and study how those illustrious ladies bred poultry.'

'Yes, father, we must study many things now we have come to England,' replied Elinor, with the gravity of seventeen. 'Aimée and I mean to begin life in earnest.'

'Life in earnest!' echoed her father. 'I have somewhere read of that fatiguing process. The words ring in my ear like some antiquated melody. Ha! I have it now. It is the title of some prosaic and philosophical work that I have seen advertised. We will procure it, together with Mrs. Glasse, Soyer, Francatelli, and other guides to economic domestic cookery, and pursue our studies together. Here comes Arbiter, who will gladly aid us by her experience.'

A spare and spruce waiting-woman appeared with a tray. This was Mrs. Arbiter, who had been in the Oreburn family ever since Sir Gilbert's marriage, having acted as maid to Lady Oreburn, and as nurse, companion, and maid to her daughters, during their many wanderings. Her faithful services had endeared her to them, in spite of her slightly morose and domineering spirit.

'Miss Aimée is quite hungry, sir, and very anxious to see you,' she said to Sir Gilbert.

'I will come, Arbiter. I really had not the courage to—to—you understand,' rejoined Sir Gilbert significantly.

'Yes, sir. But the sound of the Ashton bells has consoled Miss Aimée, and she seems quite cheerful,' replied Arbiter, receiving a wing of chicken from Sir Gilbert, who suddenly dropped his knife and fork and listened.

'Bells!—what bells?' he exclaimed; and Mr. Butterfield came in.

'The church bells, Sir Gilbert,' he said. 'Nothing can escape those Ashton gossips! I told no one but Stokes, yet they must be ringing in honour of your return.'

'Well, let them ring. They will only attract the birds to the carrion a little sooner. If Edgar Poe were here, he would sing of "Bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells." Let us pour a libation to Bacchus in honour of the ringers. Butterfield, you must drink a glass of this old port, which is nectar to our *vin ordinaire*, to wish us joy on our return.'

Mr. Butterfield sat down, and Arbiter disappeared with her tray of provisions. She was soon followed by Miss Oreburn; and the two gentlemen were left alone.

'No business to-night, Butterfield,' said Sir Gilbert, drawing his chair to the fire. 'We will pledge one another in—your wine—*n'est-ce pas?*—for my cellars must be empty.'

'To-morrow, then, Sir Gilbert,' said Mr. Butterfield, evading the question of the wine, but drinking a glass to 'the happy return of the family.'

'*The* family *par excellence* still, in spite of years and impoverishment,' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'The portraits of my ancestors look grim enough. What, going?—so soon?' he added, as Mr. Butterfield rose to depart. '*A demain*, then.'

He followed him to the hall door, and, when he had closed it after him, glanced round the huge hall.

'The same endless doors, oaken staircase, dusty antlers, torn banners, rusty armour. Grim, dreary, ancestral! What a return! And when I left, *she* was with me. Ah me! but now there are no ladies, no lights, no valet. By the way, where is Tommy?'

'Here, please, my lord,' sounded from a remote corner.

'Come forth, my Ariel, my Caliban.'

'Mother 'll be angry, please, my lord,' said Tommy, appearing from behind a screen.

'We will appease her. Who is your mother?'

'Nancy Stokes, please, my baronet.'

'So! The son of our respectable housekeeper. We will make a page of you. Will you be my daughter's Buttons?—the elegant modern name for the "Pretty Page," said to "look out afar."'

'Yes, please, my lord,' said Tommy, pulling vigorously at his forelock.

'Take care you don't pull it off, my juvenile Time,' said Sir Gilbert, leaving Tommy, and walking slowly up the stairs. Reaching the great landing, he glanced down the long gloomy corridors, and shuddered. 'If they had not chosen these rooms!' he said, and paused before one of the innumerable doors.

His daughters and a blazing fire greeted him as he entered, and he saw that the room looked fresher and more modern than those below. The chintz furniture was clean, and the gilding not quite tarnished. Aimée was lying on a sofa opposite the fire. She was a girl of fifteen, on whose appearance some sort of chronic illness had worked strangely. She had been for some years subject to what doctors call hysteria, for lack of a more appropriate name, and was unable to rise from her couch. Arbiter said that her brother's resolution to emigrate to America had caused this; but that seemed uncertain. Her attacks were, however, generally brought on by sudden emotion, either of joy or fear; and the greatest object in the lives of the friends who surrounded her was to ward them off. They took the form of fainting fits, sometimes lengthened into trances, and had given to her face an expression almost spiritual, and a pallor quite unnatural. She was generally dressed in white; and, on the present occasion, her travelling attire had been exchanged for a white dressing-gown. Golden hair fell about her, untrammelled by ribbon or comb; and eyes of the clearest, serenest azure looked out from the pale face.

'*Petit* papa, I have been expecting you long,' was her greeting as Sir Gilbert entered. 'This room is charming. I have never before seen such a fire. It asked me to keep it company, and I refused to go to bed. Is not home delicious?'

'Assuredly, my pet,' replied Sir Gilbert, with effort, walking towards the fire, and leaning his elbow on the marble mantelpiece.

'What is the matter with my little father? Are you displeased because I am not in bed?—or has Arbiter told you that I refused to take the medicine of Monsieur le Blanc, now that I am in England?' asked Aimée.

'Throw physic to the dogs, my darling!' was the only answer, as he covered his face with his hand.

'Elinor, *le petit* papa is tired,' continued Aimée, glancing at her sister, who was near her sofa.

Miss Oreburn went to her father, and laid her hand on his arm.

'Are you ill, father?—if so, we shall wish ourselves again in Brittany,' she said, hesitating.

He uncovered his face, and turned to Aimée.

'My chi dren, it is more painful than I thought,' he began. 'More than twenty years ago, your mother, herself almost a child, lay on that sofa with our Boykin in her arms. She had your golden hair, Aimée, only it was braided; your heaven-blue eyes and fair face. You might almost be your mother. These were her rooms. They said she was not a lady, but she was gentle and beautiful as the Lady of Burleigh, and, like her,

"She droop'd and droop'd before me,
Fading slowly from my side:
Three fair children first she bore me,
Then, before her time, she died."

Died, as you know, abroad, and lies in that sweet cemetery. Can you wonder that I lingered near, and was so loath to leave?'

'*Mon petit* papa!' cried Aimée, outspreading the arms that lay folded on her breast.

Sir Gilbert went to her, knelt down by her side, and let her clasp them round his neck. He sobbed, and ready tears welled into his children's eyes. He remained but a moment, when, aroused by his own weakness, he rose, and, stooping over Aimée, kissed her. One large tear fell on her cheek.

'The first and the last,' he murmured, withdrawing; and, hastily pressing his lips on Elinor's forehead, he left the room.

CHAPTER II.

OAKWOODS COURT.

WHEN Mr. Butterfield arrived at the Court the following morning, he found the great hall full of packages. Glancing at them, he was led to exclaim, 'No wonder the money went!' Most of them were deal cases, which, from their shape and size, contained pictures, and accounted, to the steward's imagination, for an expenditure abroad as great as it had been at home. As he picked his way through them, he paused before a violoncello case, an invalid chair, and sundry other anomalous articles. As he reached the library door, he turned round and surveyed the scene, giving many impressive shakes to head and hands. While so doing, Sir Gilbert appeared.

'Good morning, Butterfield. I will be with you in ten minutes,' he said, threading in and out of his packages. 'These are the wrecks of dilettanteism, and I promise to man no new galley. Only a piano for my daughter—we must have that. One touch of the old one has excruciated every nerve in our bodies. Oh, here are the easels, and the psalteries, and my gems, and my fortress!' he laughed, as he paused before a large bath. 'I assure you, Butterfield, I looked on this, and not my house, as my castle when abroad, and carried it with me, as an Indian his canoe. It sticks to me like a snail-shell to the retiring creature that draws in its horns at the approach of an enemy. In ten minutes I return to hear of my enemy, the General.'

He ran up-stairs, and Mr. Butterfield entered the library, and stationed himself near one of the windows. He had been so long steward that Oakwoods Court and its extensive park were dear to him as life itself. They had been in the Oreburn family for generations, but how long Sir Gilbert might retain possession of them, was more than even Mr. Butterfield could tell—for they were mortgaged almost to their value.

As he glanced from the large library to the scene without, he grew much depressed. The one was lined with bookshelves of carved oak, filled with the volumes gathered during several centuries; the other with the many-leaved book of bounteous nature. Acres of park-land, studded with fine trees, stretched below. To the left lay a lake, silvering in the sun; to the right, in the distance, flowed the river Wye; beyond rose the Malvern Hills. All looked peaceful and plentiful. The giant oaks, from which the place derived its name, throve quietly in the abundant woods; the land yielded its crops of grass and corn, and Nature pursued her work, although the Oreburns seemed none the richer.

'There must be a curse on the family,' muttered Mr. Butterfield; 'and unless the son retrieve their fortunes, or the daughters are prodigies, they will be ruined.'

Sir Gilbert Oreburn's only son was in America, whither he had gone to seek for the gold his father had failed to find. Mr. Butterfield had not seen him since he was an infant, for he had been bred on the Continent. Many reasons had induced Sir Gilbert to go, and remain, abroad. In addition to that of retrenchment, he had the cogent one of a so-called *mésalliance*. He had run away with the beautiful daughter of a gentleman-farmer of the name of Hope, and neither his father nor friends would forgive him for pleasing himself rather than them. He had also made a lifelong enemy of his neighbour, acquaintance, and mortgagee, by this marriage. General Arlington—then Captain—had also proposed, in form, for Miss Hope, and had been accepted by her parents, if not by her. He was rich, and his own master—Gilbert Oreburn was poor, and dependent on his father. Hence the runaway match.

Soon after Sir Gilbert's marriage, his father died, and he brought his wife to Oakwoods. The Arlingtons of Arlington Manor had, for generations, done their best to swallow up the Oreburns. The Court and its appendages were mortgaged deeply to them; and when the then owner, Captain Arlington, was disappointed of Miss Hope, he vowed to become their owner. Sir Gilbert did his best to gratify him. He and his young wife spent money faster than they could get it, and were at last compelled to leave Oakwoods. It must be confessed that many previous Oreburns had been cursed by this gift of spending, even more emphatically than Sir Gilbert, who was rather careless and easy than actually a spendthrift.

The property was left in the care of Mr. Butterfield, who found it difficult enough to supply the Continental demands, and to satisfy those of General Arlington, who insisted on interest and compound interest with the avidity of a Jew. He and Sir Gilbert had not met since the latter went abroad, and many were the surmises as to whether they would be friends or foes.

Lady Oreburn had died abroad soon after the birth of Aimée, and her friends in England had never forgiven Sir Gilbert for running away with her, and taking her to a foreign country. Still less had they forgiven him her death, which they believed to have been caused by unhappiness in exile, as they chose to consider Sir Gilbert's absence. He, on his side, had not forgiven any one who had neglected his wife, whether relative, friend, or acquaintance.

While the steward was meditating on these things, and the best means of remedying them, Miss Oreburn appeared. She said that her father would join them immediately, and asked to be allowed to share all business responsibility with him. The steward looked at this young girl with a new interest. She blushed at his shrewd, searching gaze.

'I have been accustomed to keep the accounts and to manage,' she said, with a sort of grave importance; then, changing her tone, she added hastily, 'Mr. Butterfield, may I ask a few questions concerning my mother's family? My father never mentions them, and I do not like to live in England without knowing something of them.'

'Lady Oreburn's parents are both dead,' replied Mr. Butterfield slowly. 'They lived a long way from here.' He paused.

'Have I any uncles and aunts, or other relations on her side?' she inquired eagerly; and while the question was yet on her lips her father entered.

'Heaven forbid!' he exclaimed in answer to it. 'Butterfield, my daughter's curiosity is insatiable. You must not satisfy it. Still, since she has broached the subject, are there any of that aristocratic race extant?'

'Mrs. Moneypenny is still alive, Sir Gilbert.'

'So I imagined. Where does she live?'

Mr. Butterfield hesitated as he answered,—

'Mr. Moneypenny has bought Castle House, and they reside there.'

'Castle House! So near! We are truly fortunate. The lady was your mother's sister, Elinor; the gentleman a London tradesman, I believe.'

Sir Gilbert spoke haughtily, and Elinor looked distressed.

'Scarcely a tradesman, Sir Gilbert,' broke in Mr. Butterfield. 'He was a merchant, who made an immense fortune, and has retired to this neighbourhood. He is much esteemed, and gives capital dinners.'

'Ah! a sort of Tyrian! If you want the true purple dye at a thousand pounds the scruple, Elinor, resort to the Moneypennys. I rejoice that you luxuriate in his peacocks, and other dainties, Butterfield. Any more of the antique stock in the county?'

'Only the old Squire at the Kennels, Sir Gilbert.'

'What? he alive still? And Mrs. Hope, and the sons, and the hounds? The bare enumeration frightens me. Those ledgers and genteelly-filed bills are a *bonne bouche* in comparison. Let us go into them. I know you are dying to take me to task.'

'Shall we run through the accounts, then, Sir Gilbert?' asked the steward, looking towards a pile of books and papers at which the baronet pointed.

'It will be hard work for me to sit through them, my good friend; but Elinor will perform the running. She is armed at all points,' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'Quite a domestic Euclid.'

He seated himself lazily in an easy-chair between the fire and the table, while his daughter and steward placed themselves near a heap of account-books. Sir Gilbert took a musty volume from a shelf and opened it, while Mr. Butterfield looked grave and annoyed.

'Now I am all attention, Butterfield. I am like Sir Walter Scott, and could never say a lesson without a fidget-button. You remember how a cunning varlet took Sir Walter's place as head of his class, by secretly cutting off his fidget-button?'

'No, I do not, Sir Gilbert. But if you are ready we will begin.'

Sir Gilbert cast an amused glance at his daughter, and Mr. Butterfield began.

He explained the state of affairs as concisely as he could, opening one ledger after another to substantiate what he was saying. He passed in review more than twenty years, touching on the expenses of each, and particularly on the mortgages that met them from time to time. He spoke emphatically of the claims of General Arlington; and represented that, when his interest and compound interest were paid, Sir Gilbert's income would be lamentably small for the support of an establishment.

'Can we command funds for a maid-of-all-work?' interrupted Sir Gilbert, who had been looking absently out of the window, 'Can Aimée have a donkey for her wheel-chair? May I be permitted a gun and fishing-rod, and sketch-book and colours?'

'I think I see my way through it, if we retrench,' said Miss Oreburn.

'Through those ledgers? Then you add clairvoyance to your plurality of gifts,' laughed her father. 'Seriously, Butterfield, what *are* we to do?'

'Economise and retrench, Sir Gilbert; and in the course of years we may clear off the mortages. The neighbourhood understands that you have only returned for a time, so you can live as you like.'

'How considerate of the neighbourhood! I accept the amiable permission, and propose to maintain a pic-nic existence. Still we must have servants. With my usual lack of foresight, I have already engaged a page in our delectable housekeeper's son. Suppose we retain her as general servant? We should have amusement and underdone mutton. Let us have her up, as the interlude to this, our very dry and dull domestic drama.'

Sir Gilbert rang the bell before Mr. Butterfield could enounce his opinion that Stokes had been long enough at the Court.

'We might keep her for a time,' suggested Elinor. 'She would be less expensive than a housekeeper.'

Mr. Butterfield looked at her approvingly, and Sir Gilbert said that, with such a pair of restraining handcuffs on either side of him, he must of necessity be held back.

'Indeed I intend to restrain myself,' he added, with his peculiar smile and tone. 'I shall not, with the amiable countenance of you, my superiors, enlarge the present establishment. Jim, whom I remember of old as stable-boy, is, I find, now regnant in that region. We will make of him "coachman and footman and all." No, my Baronet shall be footman. Quite a family party. Has the Stokes a daughter or niece, whom we may constitute housemaid?'

'She has a dozen, I believe, and has had them all hanging about here!' grumbled Mr. Butterfield.

'You would call her matriarchal? Ah, here she is! Good morning, Stokes.'

Sir Gilbert stuck his glass in his eye, as Stokes appeared, curtseying with difficulty.

'Hi hope the curry pleased you, sir. Hi did it haccording to Harbiter's horders,' she said.

'Truly it was *multum in parvo.* You made so much of the dry bones of those poor chickens that Miss Oreburn thinks you would help us to retrench. I leave the rest to you, *ma fille*,' said Sir Gilbert, glancing from Stokes to Elinor.

Miss Oreburn coloured ; but she understood her father too well not to be able to take up his *rôle.*

'Sir Gilbert means that we propose your continuing here as cook for the present,' she said, with a certain decision that sounded almost haughty, bred of her father's indecision.

'Me has cook, and my Tommy has page!' exclaimed Stokes, breathless with astonishment.

'And Jim as coachman,' supplied Sir Gilbert.

'To be sure, miss, we *shall* be proud!' whistled Stokes, for her breath was shortened by surprise ; and she glanced triumphantly at the steward.

'Mr. Butterfield and my daughter think that, with the addition of a housemaid, our establishment may be complete,' said Sir Gilbert maliciously.

'A large place for two pair of hands, sir ; but if I might make so bold as to recommend my Mary, as is leaving Miss Whiston'—

'Perhaps we can talk of this another time,' interrupted Elinor, catching Mr. Butterfield's indignant glance ; and Stokes was dismissed.

'We shall never have peace, Sir Gilbert,' broke out the steward. 'You will have bell-ringing and all sorts of noises. I believe that woman is interested in keeping up the old story of the ghost in the east wing, and sets all the bells a-going when she chooses. I have never met General Arlington here on business that they haven't rung.'

'How very amusing!' ejaculated Sir Gilbert, while Elinor looked inquisitive. 'I imagined my venerable relative safe in a more distant planet. We will have a *séance.* Does he communicate through furniture as well as bells?'

'What does it mean?' asked Elinor of Mr. Butterfield.

'The old story of the suicide in the east wing, Miss Oreburn. Sir Gilbert ordered it to be shut up, and no one has ventured to penetrate it since.'

Sir Gilbert grew suddenly thoughtful, and turned the conversation. It was on his wife's account that he had closed this part of the Court, and, indeed, he disliked it himself. His grandfather had destroyed himself from a pressure of money difficulties, such as was threatening him.

'To do one thing well is sufficient for one day,' he remarked, recovering his usual manner. 'We have settled our moderate establishment, let us pursue the accounts to-morrow. Butterfield, how is the General?—and what is his present object?'

'He calls himself an invalid. I believe his object is eventually to secure the Court. He has bought up all the mortgages, and desires to oblige you to sell.'

'The old miser! He knows it is entailed; and I would rather rot in jail than let him have it. Is he as vindictive as ever?'

'I think so; he is not a man to forgive and forget. But I hope, Sir Gilbert, you will conciliate him if possible. Excuse my venturing to give advice.'

'Willingly, my good Butterfield; and excuse me if I do not take it,' said Sir Gilbert nonchalantly.

Mr. Butterfield rose, saying that they would resume business on the morrow, since Sir Gilbert wished it, and walked disconsolately out of the room.

'Now let us release our Rosa Bonheur from her trammels, and turn from pounds, shillings, and pence to ethereal art!' said Sir Gilbert, yawning; and he and Elinor left the library for the packages in the hall.

CHAPTER III.

WHERE WILL IT END?

THE first people that called on Sir Gilbert and his daughters, after their return, were the vicar and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Tenderton. They did not wait, like the rest of the neighbourhood, for Sir Gilbert's appearance at church, but came, in their office of pastor and pastoress, on the Saturday preceding his first Sunday at Oakwoods. They were shown by Arbiter into the large drawing-room, already made habitable by the addition of paintings, books, and articles of virtù brought from abroad; and they stood to wonder at the change effected by taste in an apartment which had seemed to them a wilderness when they explored the Court some few years back. They were strangers to Sir Gilbert, for, when he left England, the living of Ashton-under-Oakwoods was held by another incumbent.

The Reverend Henry Tenderton was much beloved in his parish. He was a middle-aged man, of plain appearance and shy manners;

that is to say, people who did not know him well called him plain, while his intimate friends declared his face beautiful. It was thin, with a prominent nose, grave mouth, bushy grey eyebrows, and scant whiskers ; but there was a 'dim religious light' in his deep-set grey eyes, which seemed to tell of holy thought and wise purpose. He was a gentleman, a scholar, a lover of the country, and, above all, a lover of mankind. It was doubtless this latter characteristic that won the love and confidence of his flock, for he sought to 'magnify his office' by that gentle tact which never willingly offends. If he rebuked, it was courteously ; if he advised, it was meekly ; if he praised, it was humbly.

Mrs. Tenderton was, in many respects, a help-meet for him, though his opposite in most ways. He had tact, she courage, and the critics called her strong-minded ; not only on account of this inflexibility, but because she dressed plainly, and wore an unfashionably large bonnet, and still larger hat. Indeed her young friends were wont to change the vowel in the latter article of dress, and call her hat her hut. Nevertheless, she was an excellent woman, and by no means ill-looking, with a shrewd, pleasant face and soft brown hair. She was a lady, moreover, in every sense ; albeit she sometimes made mistakes when striving to unite the discordant elements of her parish. This was her weak point,—if love of reconciliation can be called a weakness,—and it was prominent in her mind while she stood with her husband, admiring Sir Gilbert's beloved Rosa Bonheur reposing on a large chair.

Sir Gilbert, meanwhile, was remonstrating with Arbiter.

'Could you not say we were engaged? Will they not leave us alone for one week? Pray send Miss Oreburn, and make my excuses.'

'They look nice, sir,' was Arbiter's rejoinder, as she went in search of Elinor.

'You must come, papa. I could not face them alone,' said Elinor, and Sir Gilbert accompanied her to the drawing-room.

He saw at a glance that they were 'nice,' and soon set them at their ease by his winning manner ; for they had to overcome some shyness, while apologising for so early a visit. The truth was, both had come on a mission,—the Vicar to offer his services to be used as Sir Gilbert might need them ; the Vicaress to conciliate,—and her mission must, she believed, be carried out before the Sunday.

Her first impression of Sir Gilbert and his daughter was flattering to them, but not satisfactory to herself. They looked distinguished and elegant, but not quite the sort of people to whom she could readily address her messages of reconciliation. But she had once made a free translation of a German proverb, that she had taken for her motto ever since ; and she bore it impressed on the seal of her mind at this juncture. It was, 'Do the best, and leave the rest.'

Elinor, on her side, regarded Mrs. Tenderton with astonishment as unlike any one she had seen before, and was not altogether enchanted with these, her first visitors. However, she strove to talk, and succeeded ; and they were soon engaged in discussing parish matters, in which Sir Gilbert was supposed to be interested.

'Farmers and labourers equally rejoice at your return,' said the Vicar mildly.

'It is a sore in a parish when the great house is empty,' remarked his wife. 'You will have enough to do, Miss Oreburn, if you are disposed for good works. The poor and the schools sadly want help.'

'I shall like to learn, if you will teach me,' said Elinor, and the Vicar's religious eyes met hers encouragingly.

'You forget that we are only lodgers, and now come home to retrench,' said Sir Gilbert. 'General Arlington is our too-indulgent landlord, and, I am informed, rules the land.'

Mrs. Tenderton felt that the time for one of her missions had arrived, and she plunged into it.

'The poor General is a great invalid, or fancies himself so, which is much the same thing. Indeed he is to be pitied. You remember him, Sir Gilbert?' she said rapidly.

'But too well,' was the curt answer.

'I met him and Dr. Hope yesterday,' she continued. 'I suppose you scarcely remember Septimus Hope? He is a very clever physician, and half lives at the Manor, in attendance on the poor General.'

'Ah! a man who survives his complaints, dies of his doctor,' laughed Sir Gilbert, on whom Mrs. Tenderton's shrewd eyes and large bonnet were turned.

She was not quite sure of her depth, but she waded on, for had she not a mission?

'We were talking of you, Sir Gilbert, and I fancy the General will call on you shortly,' she resumed.

She had floundered through and landed somehow.

'On me!' exclaimed Sir Gilbert, uplifting his eyebrows, and looking as much surprised as, in his nonchalance, he could look.

'He certainly gave me to understand so,' said Mrs. Tenderton, feeling her ground insecure.

'He does us much honour. To see the nakedness of the land will he come. Eh, Elinor?'

'I should scarcely think he would venture to come at all,' replied Miss Oreburn haughtily, and Mrs. Tenderton trembled for her diplomacy.

'My dear,' began the Vicar, who had previously argued upon the propriety of delaying this attempt at reconciliation, 'I am not sure that General Arlington positively expressed his intention of calling on Sir Gilbert.'

The truth of the matter was that Mrs. Tenderton had said to the General, 'Of course you will call?' and he had replied, 'I have not made up my mind. Possibly.'

'He needs no apologist, Vicar,' returned Sir Gilbert carelessly. 'He has written or spoken his own *apologia* ever since he was born. If he calls, it will be with the intention of accepting a mortgage either on me or my daughters, for I hear we are the only remaining goods and chattels unpledged.'

'I understand he is in trouble, poor man,' blurted out Mrs. Tenderton. 'It is reported that his brother has died abroad.'

'What, George!' exclaimed Sir Gilbert, effectually roused. 'When and where did he die?'

'It is not known. The General says nothing,' replied the mediator, surprised at the sudden change in his manner.

'He never did!' cried Sir Gilbert excitedly. 'He would have let him rot in jail, or die of starvation. Poor George! everybody liked him. Your genuine scapegrace is always popular. His Excellency the General, *en petit maître*, was never so well-beloved. But I don't believe he is dead; he has tried to die, and come to life again so often, that this is probably another failure. It has always been with him, "To be, or not to be—that is the question."'

'A grave question for us all,' said the Vicar quietly.

'Almost as grave as to be born, only we have no choice in that,' returned Sir Gilbert. 'If we had, poor George and many others might not have hesitated. I wish I knew if this report were true or false. I saw him more than once abroad.'

'Who was he?—I never heard of him,' asked Elinor, struck by her father's unusual seriousness.

'The General's only brother, who ran through the modicum of money his father allowed him while in the army, sold out, got into debt, borrowed, squandered again, and finally forged his father's name, and was compelled to leave the country. He has been wandering over the world, like a branded Cain, between twenty and thirty years, for he left England before I married, and how he has existed he and his brother alone know. If you could unite these discordant elements, you would indeed perform a miracle, for your amiable invalid indulged in a most unchristian dislike of his thriftless relative.'

Sir Gilbert glanced at Mrs. Tenderton with his amused smile as he concluded this speech, and she coloured, and perceived that her mission was understood; therefore she put off its second part until some future opportunity. The results were speedier than she anticipated, for Sir Gilbert expressed his intention of going to church the following day, which, from his manner, she scarcely hoped.

'We must appear *incognito* to-morrow,' he said, still addressing Mrs. Tenderton, 'for my daughter's maid declares she is not fit to be seen, and has not a fashionable bonnet. I pacify her by promising to go in state in future. I propose that family ark called an omnibus, which is, I hear, the fashion for over-wearied establishments ; but my daughter assures me we cannot afford it. I argue that we must, for we shall have our plethoric housekeeper, our lady's-maid, our coachman, my Baronet in buttons, our housemaid, our—I lose myself —Dundreary himself could not count our domestics. The General is not better appointed.'

'He keeps twenty servants and a doctor, so the gossips say,' laughed Mr. Tenderton, as he and his wife rose to take leave.

The following morning, Sir Gilbert and Elinor did, in effect, walk quietly to church. It was a bright April day, and as they left the gabled and porticoed Court to wander through shrubberies and woods, Elinor declared that she had never been so happy in her life.

'I do not wonder that Arlington envies me this goodly property,' said Sir Gilbert, pausing in the midst of a neglected, turfy bridlepath, that he had cantered through as boy and man.

'He shall not have it, father!' cried Elinor. 'We will economise, and save it for you and Gilbert. How delicious are the anemones and wild hyacinths!—how fair the primroses! It is one huge garden. You said the sun never shone in England, yet the sky is bluer than in Italy. Listen to the birds ; they sing us a chorus of welcome home. Home!—what an expressive word it is!—a thousand times more so than *chez moi*, *da me—Heimath*, even. You must rejoice to be at home.'

'I think I begin to rejoice, *ma fille;* but you are more imaginative than I thought you. Hark! there are the bells—the old church bells. They carry me back to childhood, when I was ever too late, and my dear mother lectured me each Sunday. Let us, at least, be in time to-day.'

They hurried through the wood, pausing again a moment to look at the distant spire, which suddenly appeared like a vignette opposite. They passed out into a hop-garden, which, Sir Gilbert said, was picturesque as a vineyard in autumn, if only adorned with poles in spring. Another grassy path brought them to a side gate which led into the churchyard, and thence to the chancel door. They entered the church just as the Vicar was going into the reading-desk. Sir Gilbert glanced through the chancel for the old family pew ; but it had disappeared. Remembering that the church had been restored, he walked down the aisle, and went into the first open sitting. It chanced to be one of those allotted to General Arlington and his score of servants, so, happily unconscious, he and Elinor sat behind the establishment. He was thankful that the huge pew with the faded red curtains had vanished with the spirit of a past age, and that he was lost in the congregation. But the Vicar was sorely troubled when he perceived him at the tail-end of the General's domestics.

Some people said that Sir Gilbert was not a religious man ; but we will not pronounce that anathema upon him. He had his notions, and they were formed in a lax age and in many countries. His opinions might have been called English-German, as his ancestors were Anglo-Saxon ; for the seed of his heraldic tree was sown in the times of the Heptarchy. Whatever his religious views, however, he openly professed himself a Protestant, as that name was understood at the time of the Reformation ; and in this he agreed with the Reverend Henry Tenderton, to whose 'plain, unvarnished' sermon he listened with attention and interest. The Vicar preached so that the illiterate could understand, the literate be instructed ; and, if his manner was called by some old-fashioned, his words were so well chosen, and his illustrations so graphic, that he arrested the careless and made the thoughtless think.

When the service was over, Sir Gilbert left the church quickly ; but not so quickly as to avoid recognition. The tenants and poor people stood about to welcome him, and, seeing still many old friends amongst them, he was fain to pause, shake hands, and introduce his daughter. Elinor, blushing, smiling, and speaking with her slight foreign accent, was much admired ; and she thought home ever more and more beautiful.

While they were thus engaged, Mrs. Tenderton appeared, accompanied by two gentlemen. She had managed to continue her missionary attempts by securing General Arlington and his doctor, and detailing to them the high opinion she had conceived of Sir Gilbert and Miss Oreburn.

'There they are, I declare!' she said innocently, going towards them as they stood amongst their friends. 'This tells well for the parish.'

Sir Gilbert, seeing her large bonnet, advanced to meet her, and in so doing perceived her companions. The position was difficult, but he mastered it. He and the General had met as acquaintances, if not friends, after his marriage, and it would be advisable for them so to meet again. So he looked his foe in the face –if foe he was, for the man who holds your mortgages is not necessarily your enemy—and moved towards him. Extending the tips of his fingers, as if they had met yesterday, he said, with his usually careless and well-bred air,—

'How d'ye do, General? Elinor, you remember General Arlington? Ah no! I forget the lapse of years. My eldest daughter, General.'

Elinor had followed her father, and, between surprise and annoyance, put as much hauteur into her bow as that salutation is capable of. General Arlington, having touched Sir Gilbert's fingers, raised his hat. Mrs. Tenderton congratulated herself.

'These young people make one feel awkward, General. You are fortunate in possessing no such reminders,' said Sir Gilbert.

General Arlington frowned, and darted a doubtful glance from two piercing black eyes on the nonchalant Baronet. Elinor was watching him, and saw that he was a little man, well-dressed, and very young-looking. He turned suddenly and met her eye.

'You were never in England before, I believe?' he said, his manner slightly aggressive.

'Never,' she replied, her head erect, her temper rising.

She was—we must use the appellative—an aristocratic-looking girl, with an interesting, if not absolutely beautiful, face. Her manner was, perhaps, slightly haughty, but, even when haughtiest, was graceful. She knew, if the world did not, that she was shy; and she could scarcely tell whether pride or bashfulness prevailed in this, her introduction to him she considered the enemy of her family. His manner, however, underwent a palpable change as he looked at her; and the frown that had knitted his forehead turned to a captivating smile.

'I hope you will like your native country,' he said. 'Allow me to introduce you to Dr. Hope. One of the Hopes of the Kennels, you know. A sort of distant connection.'

He glanced maliciously at Sir Gilbert, while a young man came forward, on whom Elinor looked with interest and curiosity, because he bore her mother's maiden name. He was sufficiently well-looking, perfectly self-possessed, and she remarked that, when he spoke, his manner was deferential, and his voice remarkably soft.

'Are you one of the Squire's sons? I am glad to make your acquaintance. How is your father?' said Sir Gilbert, again offering his finger-tips, which the young man took gently and held a moment.

'He has the gout, as usual, I regret to say, or he would have done himself the honour of welcoming you home,' replied Dr. Hope.

'And your mother?'

'She is a martyr to rheumatism,—also as usual,' he answered, in a voice that seemed to smile.

'And your brothers?'

'All in robust health.'

'That is, at least consoling. Tell your father and mother we will come and see them. Good morning, General.'

The little party separated.

'Why the deuce did he speak to me?' said General Arlington to Dr. Hope. 'But what an elegant girl his daughter is! A decidedly elegant girl, you know.'

'Elinor, that bow of yours would have conquered Cæsar. Cleopatra was never so magnificent,' said Sir Gilbert. 'The General will be at your feet, and we will unite our differences by a congenial marriage. He is in wonderful preservation. I should like to know if those are his own teeth.'

'I did not think you would speak to him. You are incomprehensible,' said Elinor.

'I cannot return the compliment. Your manner is as transparent as Mrs. Tenderton's, who thinks she has begun a Christian work; but—where will it end?'

CHAPTER IV.

OUR MORTGAGEE.

SUITS of plain livery were ordered from the village tailor for Jim and his nephew Tommy, and the latter haunted the shop of that artist three or four times a day, till he brought his triumphantly to his mother. It would be difficult to say whether that estimable parent, her son, or Sir Gilbert was most delighted when Tommy appeared, swelling with importance, 'full dressed;' but Sir Gilbert said that, being now the 'best buttoned of baronets,' he should give him a few lessons, and took him to the library for that purpose.

Tommy stood, his hands glued to his sides like a recruit, while Sir Gilbert initiated him into the mystery of answering the door, and other offices of service. It has been said that Sir Gilbert resented all slights shown to his wife during her brief sojourn at the Court, and it was his intention to avoid intimacy with such people as had given them; therefore he said to his page,—

'Now, my Baronet, you will have to say "Not at home" to Lord Canningford, Mrs. Ossery, and Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny, should they honour us by calling.'

'Shall I say "Not at home, my lord," please, sir?' asked Tommy.

'Not to the footman,' replied Sir Gilbert.

'If it is his lordship hisself, sir?' persisted Tommy.

'You had still better confine yourself to "Not at home," lest you should mistake his man for him. Does Mr. Moneypenny drive? I suppose you know him?'

'Dear, yes, sir; a grander carriage and horses than my lord's, sir; and Mrs. Moneypenny's a sight finer than her ladyship.'

'So I should imagine. Nevertheless, you will not admit them, should they condescend to approach our doorstep.'

'Is General Arlington to come in, sir?'

'He will not call. Why do you ask?'

'Because mother says he's a hold curmudgeon, sir, and the luck goes when he shows his nose.'

'Poetical and practical,' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'But we will see him if he presents himself, and all other visitors.'

'Miss Whiston, please, sir?'

'Yes. Why not, my Baronet?'

'Because mother says that, if she comes, everybody 'll know that we haven't got a frying-pan.'

'Then they will not expect to be invited to dinner,' said Sir Gilbert, whose amusement was great at these new lights.

But Tommy adhered to orders, and in the course of time said 'Not at home' to Lord Canningford's footman and to Mrs. Ossery's page; but the Moneypennys did not give him the chance, for they did not call. However, General Arlington and Miss Whiston did, and it happened to be at the same time. Tommy had the felicity of seeing the General's well-appointed brougham, and Miss Whiston's elegant pony-carriage, at the door simultaneously, and of saying 'Yes,' to a powdered footman and a green-liveried page; also of hearing Miss Whiston say to General Arlington, 'You here, General! Well, I am astonished!' as he ushered them and Dr. Hope into the drawing-room. He was disappointed at finding it unoccupied, as nothing delighted him so much as shouting out a name at the top of his voice.

The General was almost as much astonished as Miss Whiston, but he apologised to her as follows:—

'You see it is time that bygones should be bygones, and we thought it right to call. It is awkward to meet people continually, you know, and not be on terms; and certainly Miss Oreburn is a charming girl—a most elegant girl, you know!'

'Hum!' ejaculated Miss Whiston.

'Where is Di? Why didn't she call with you?' asked the General.

'She waited to see what you would do,' said Miss Whiston bluntly.

'These pictures must have cost a tolerable sum,' said the General, walking leisurely round the room, followed by Dr. Hope. 'I suppose they don't mean to insult me by not appearing,' he added in a whisper to that gentleman.

General Arlington was, as Sir Gilbert said, in good preservation. None but his doctor and valet knew how far he was preserved by nature, and how far by art; for if 'no man is a hero to his valet-de-chambre,' certainly no man is an Adonis to his doctor. To the rest of the world, especially the female portion of it, he passed as an Adonis of forty or fifty. He was a little man, and was wont to insist on the fact that many of our celebrated heroes were little men. Alexander, Bonaparte, and Nelson were his favourite examples. He had been a brave officer, and served in many campaigns, but his infirm health—so he said—caused him to retire from the army. A valetudinarian veteran, who still wishes to preserve the reputation of a beau, seems an anomaly ; but your selfish people are ever anomalies. Although he had often faced death courageously enough on the battlefield, he had an abject dread of him off it, and placed his doctor between himself and the enemy, as a shield from his scythe.

He had been fortunate in finding so invulnerable a shield as his young friend Dr. Hope, and many were the speculations concerning them. If the General did not marry, it was suggested he might make the doctor his heir. They were a great contrast. The General had a sharp black eye, Jewish nose, thin face, thin lips, a square figure ; his voice was shrill, his manner by turns arbitrary and timorous. The doctor had a penetrating grey eye, nose slightly celestial, rounded cheeks, full lips, a well-made, manly figure ; his voice was mellifluous, his manner alternately bland and sprightly. He was said to be *the* Hope of his family ; a poor pun made at his expense, because he was clever and cultivated, and his relations rough and ill-educated.

He had from boyhood professed great admiration for General Arlington. Some people were kind enough to say this arose from sundry half-crowns bestowed on him for slight juvenile services and expressions of devotion, and was maintained by acceptable guinea fees ; but then people always know their neighbours' affairs better than they do themselves. Certain it was that Dr. Hope had more influence with General Arlington than any one else, and had also been of greater professional service to him than any previous medical man. Indeed he was rapidly gaining a high reputation as a physician, and it was said that he had even studied mesmerism, galvanism, hydropathy, and homœopathy, that he might be armed at all points. But if this was true, he did not make it apparent. What he did make apparent was his taste for the fine arts ; for, like the rest of us, he made the most of what he understood the least. He sang French songs, and accompanied himself on the piano, acted, read, discoursed on painting, and was what is called 'quite a success' in society.

Miss Whiston, the lady who accompanied him and the General in their critical examination of Sir Gilbert's pictures, was that staple village commodity called a gossip. She was a large, florid, talkative, inquisitive, and fashionably-dressed woman, who resided at a pretty place called the Lodge, situated on the outskirts of Ashton-under-

Oakwoods. With her lived Mrs. Owler, a widowed relative of General Arlington, who, being many years younger than he, was not without her hopes and expectations. This was the Di who had waited to make her call at the Court until she saw what the General would do. These ladies, being of good old English families, were leaders of fashion in and near Ashton, and from the Lodge issued the ultimatum of all the proprieties.

Sir Gilbert and Miss Oreburn received the stiff General and pliant doctor courteously, of course; while Sir Gilbert and Miss Whiston met as old friends, and the lady greeted Elinor with effusion.

'So glad you are come back, Sir Gilbert! Delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Oreburn! Ashton has not been Ashton, nor the Court the Court, since you left. Nobody to replace you but iron and coal gentry, who have lots of money and no genealogy.'

'Better worth knowing than I am,' replied Sir Gilbert. 'We cannot live on our genealogies—eh, General? You could not maintain the goodly number of domestics who did me the honour of preceding me on Sunday, on your genealogy.'

'I should think not; they cost me a fortune. It is impossible to conceive the waste and extravagance of such an establishment as mine, without a mistress,' said the General, glancing from Miss Whiston to Elinor.

'Then why on earth don't you marry, General?' exclaimed Miss Whiston, who spared no one.

'There are so few ladies worth having now-a-days, you know; they are so fast,' replied the General, again looking at Elinor.

'Ha, ha, ha!' loudly laughed Miss Whiston. 'I should think you might have found a slow one during all these years. What do you say, Sir Gilbert?'

'I find it inconvenient to talk of years; they have stood still apparently for you and—the General,' replied Sir Gilbert, turning to General Arlington, who was attempting to engage Elinor in conversation.

'You see, Miss Oreburn,' he began, 'what I meant was that gentlemen do not understand housekeeping, you know, and the management of servants. Besides, I am an invalid, you know, and they impose on me.'

'I should have imagined a housekeeper would manage for you,' remarked Elinor coldly.

'No greater mistake. They are the climax of domestic worry.'

'My daughter will agree with you,' interrupted Sir Gilbert maliciously. 'She is her own housekeeper, and reduces our establishment to a minimum. Political economy is her forte.'

'My father is jesting. We are obliged to be economical,' said Elinor, looking at the General.

'It is refreshing to see a young lady so wise,' said he, with an admiring bow.

Sir Gilbert, seeing a defiant curl of Elinor's lip, turned the conversation.

'You are an invalid, General. I have the slight advantage of health.'

'Not exactly—Dr. Hope will tell you that I am not a confirmed invalid. I am only—well, what am I, Septimus?'

Dr. Hope's parents had malevolently given him this name as a seventh son, and had made him a doctor for the same reason. He smiled blandly as he replied,—

'That is a broad question. You are not a confirmed invalid, but hard service and unhealthy climates make it imperative on you to be careful of your health.'

The General gave an approving nod.

'He would be as well as I am, who never ail, if he would take to homœopathy. Drugs are the root of all evil,' said Miss Whiston.

At this moment the door was thrown open, and Tommy magnificently announced, 'Mr. Butterfield.'

'I question if you have a man who can advance and retreat like my Baronet,' remarked Sir Gilbert to the General.

'Very well done, upon my word!' said the General.

Mr. Butterfield came forward, saying joyfully,—

'I am truly delighted to find you here, General!—and I must apologise if I ask for five minutes' private conversation with you and Sir Gilbert. I don't know when I may catch you together again.'

General Arlington frowned. He had not expected to be seized on for business. Neither did Sir Gilbert consider it agreeable.

'Not so soon, I entreat, Butterfield,' he urged; but, catching Elinor's anxious glance, added, 'Ah, General, you are happy in possessing no womenkind. My daughter's eyes bid me obey, and I submit.'

'We must always bow to the ladies, you know,' remarked the General, turning towards Elinor, and rising reluctantly.

'Only five minutes, General—about that farm,' whispered Mr. Butterfield; and they went into the library.

Dr. Hope at once engaged the ladies in conversation, and soon discovered that Elinor was musical. They were engaged in a discussion on ancient and modern music, when they were startled by the distant ringing of house-bells. Peal after peal sounded continuously, as if every room in the Court were alive.

'What can be the matter?' exclaimed Elinor, hurrying to the door and opening it.

The bells rang on.

'It must be the ghost,' said Miss Whiston; 'I never before believed in it. Good morning, Miss Oreburn. My compliments to Sir Gilbert.'

Miss Whiston hurried away, and Elinor was left alone with the doctor.

'What can it be?' she repeated, listening, as peal succeeded peal.

'A trick, Miss Oreburn,' replied Dr. Hope quietly. 'Whenever General Arlington goes into the library, all the bells of the east wing take to ringing. I believe Mrs. Stokes, who kept the Court during your absence, is at the bottom of it. Other noises have been heard occasionally, but the bells are the most prominent.'

Dr. Hope's significant speech was arrested by Arbiter.

'Miss Aimée is in one of her fits,' she said. 'Will you come at once, Miss Oreburn? If you are Dr. Hope, sir, will you come also? These unaccountable bells have terrified the life out of her.'

Elinor ran up-stairs to her sister's room, followed by Dr. Hope and Arbiter.

They found Aimée, like the 'Lily Maid of Astolat,' with

> 'All her bright hair streaming down,
> And she herself in white.'

She was lying senseless in the embrasure of an oriel window. The breeze stirred the golden threads of her hair, and moved the petals of the flowers on a table at her side, but there was no other motion. Dr. Hope paused, astonished at her loveliness. He felt her pulse, listened for her breathing, laid his hand on her heart, and for the moment thought she was dead. But Arbiter told him that she had been subject to such attacks for many years, and that sudden excitement threw her into a swoon which sometimes lasted for hours, or even a day. The mysterious pealing of so many bells had frightened her, and caused the present fit. Dr. Hope said that he could cure her, and left the room in search of medicines which he always kept in General Arlington's carriage. When he returned to administer them, he spoke of mesmerism and galvanism, and stood watching her attentively until her eyes unclosed and unveiled the blue beneath, as when a light cloud passes and reveals the sky.

'Is mamma calling me?' she murmured, looking at Elinor.

'No one is speaking, darling,' replied her sister, bending over her.

'Why did those strange bells ring?' she asked; and Dr. Hope, gently removing Elinor, and fixing his eyes on her, answered,—

'They were rung by the rats. The house has been so long untenanted that they assist at every ceremonial, and hold constant carnival, running along the wires until one bell rings after another. If you hear them again, resist the temptation to swoon, and you will not mind them. They will even seem musical. I am a physician, and you may credit me.'

'Is that really all?' she asked.

'All,' he replied, still gazing upon her fixedly, and moving his hands almost imperceptibly.

He continued thus, until her eyes closed again, and she slept. He was mesmerising her.

'I gave her a sedative; she will awake better. Is she always reading these religious books?' he said, taking from her couch a tract by Adolphe Monod.

'She likes religious reading best,' replied Elinor.

'Hide the trash,' returned he, putting down the book and taking up a sketch of early primroses and anemones which had fallen from her hand to the floor. 'This is a healthier occupation. How beautifully it is done! Are those her drawings on the walls?'

'Some of them; the rest are sketches by my father.'

Dr. Hope walked quietly round the room to look at them, and finally paused before an easel in one of the windows, on which was a half-finished sketch of Sir Gilbert's.

'Charming! What a delightful room!' he said, glancing at Elinor's tasteful arrangements, and Aimée's recumbent figure.

While he was thus engaged, his friend and patron, General Arlington, was expressing his annoyance at the bell ringing. He told Sir Gilbert that, each time he and Mr. Butterfield had met at the Court on business, he had been greeted by this detestable jingle. The steward said that he believed Stokes was at the bottom of it, and Sir Gilbert immediately summoned her.

'Be so good as to account for the "tintinnabulation of the bells, bells, bells,"' he said, as she appeared.

'There's no haccounting for it, sir,' replied Stokes, who took up her position with her back to the door, and stood with arms folded and eyes as stolid as her manner. 'So long as nothing troubles the hold gen'leman, he's as quiet as a lamb; but when he's roused up, there's no knowing what he'll do. He don't seem to like some people, and when them comes has he can't habide, he's has vagarious has my poor husband was. You remember him, General Harlington, sir?—him as was your coachman, Social Stokes. You sent him hoff without warning, sir, because honfriendly people said he'd took to drinking. And he never held up his head hafterwards. Drinking, indeed! No more than the hold gen'leman.'

'Are you speaking of my venerable grandfather, Stokes?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'To be sure, sir. 'Tis him as rings the bells.'

'Quite a novel spiritual demonstration. We will invite him to a *séance*, and, unlike our modern mediums, he will respond by the tongue. He talks more volubly in the spirit than the flesh.'

'It is a ridiculous piece of trickery,' said Mr. Butterfield.

'Make so bold, sir!' said Stokes, turning her eyes on the steward, 'but my belief is as he misbelikes General Harlington. Hear how he's a-ringing!'

General Arlington rose in some perturbation, and said he would return to the ladies.

'Miss Whiston's gone, and Miss Horeburn and Dr. Hope is with Miss Haimée, who's been took hill,' said Stokes.

'Aimée ill! Excuse me a moment, General,' cried Sir Gilbert, and hastened up-stairs.

He met Dr. Hope on the landing, and led him into a neighbouring room to ask his opinion of Aimée. He said that he believed her illness was hysteria, and that she required constant medical supervision and a resolute control. The doctor desired nothing better than to secure for himself the *entrée* of the Court; but he was too sagacious to let Sir Gilbert understand his wishes, so he added that Mr. Mant was a clever surgeon, and in good practice.

'Is Mant alive still? Old women never die,' said Sir Gilbert. 'I scarcely think I could trust my daughter to him—indeed she has conceived a horror of the faculty generally. Perhaps you will kindly call again as a friend, and time may arrange the rest. The General is waiting for you.'

They went down-stairs, and found General Arlington in the hall in conversation with Tommy.

'We will storm my grandfather's citadel and open the east wing before your next visit, General,' said Sir Gilbert. 'And you, my Baronet, just inform your mother—who, by the way, General, is quite an artiste in cookery—that if my venerable ancestor rings again, I shall find it necessary to clear out our present establishment.'

Tommy disappeared.

'A sharp boy—a very sharp boy. Who is he?' said the General.

'Son and heir of our cook and housekeeper,' replied Sir Gilbert. I fear that excellent woman and her Social were not on the most affectionate terms with you; but—we cannot command our affections, as the novelists say.'

The General took leave rather stiffly; but the doctor compensated or it by refined civility; and, as they drove off, Sir Gilbert said to Mr. Butterfield,—

'He envies me even my Baronet; I mistake if he will not also envy me my daughter. Shall we offer them in exchange for that dross you were chaffering over?'

'If you play your cards well, Sir Gilbert, we may yet win,' was the steward's reply.

'My good fellow, I have none to play,' returned Sir Gilbert, who, nevertheless, was seized on by the steward to discuss business.

There was a certain farm called Great Oaks belonging to Sir Gilbert, which joined General Arlington's property, and which he was desirous of possessing. It was unentailed, and he offered to buy it. As he already held mortgages on it to two-thirds of its value, Mr. Butterfield was inclined to sell, and it was of this they were talking when the bells began to ring. Sir Gilbert, with customary indifference, left the matter in the hands of his steward, and had only asked if he might be allowed one hundred pounds out of the surplus to pay for a piano he had ordered for his daughter. It was of this Mr. Butterfield spoke when the General left.

'Did you say you had actually ordered a piano, Sir Gilbert?'

'Yes. One can live without food, but not without a piano. Elinor s a proficient. You must hear her play, Butterfield. And I scrape a little on the violin and 'cello as an amateur accompanist. I wish I had been brought up to the profession.'

'But, Sir Gilbert'—

'But me no buts, my good fellow. This is my one extravagance. You see how economically I have arranged domesticities. I have also decided on not adding to our out-of-door establishment. Did you see how neatly Jim has turned out the old Irish car, and rubbed down that horse-of-all-work? I shall drive nothing else. The carriages must continue to rot,—the horses remain at Tattersall's. We had none abroad, so we shall not miss them. But, between ourselves, I wish the General had not called. You remark that every word I utter is, or ought to be, an offence; and for the life of me I cannot help it.'

'You had better try, Sir Gilbert,' said the steward gravely. 'He has you in his power. Will you allow me to open the east wing?'

'Not just yet. Let him have another fright, and the old gentleman a respite. But who was this Social who, Stokes privately told me, "always drove steady, heven in his cups"?'

Mr. Butterfield informed Sir Gilbert that Social Stokes had been for some years General Arlington's coachman, but, having offended him, was dismissed upon the charge of drunkenness. Whether the charge was deserved or not, the man had not been able to get another place, and had finally died of drinking. His wife had supported him until his death, and had, according to Mr. Butterfield's belief, kept him at the Court, where she was also supposed to have brought up Tommy and the daughter proposed as housemaid at Oakwoods.

'Anything else, Butterfield?' asked Sir Gilbert, glancing anxiously out of the window.

'Nothing at present,' was the reply, and Sir Gilbert escaped, and went to Aimée's room, whistling, 'Batti, batti.'

CHAPTER V.

DEEP GREY EYES.

'WHO was the gentleman that sent me to sleep?' asked Aimée, as her father entered her room. 'He has such strange eyes. I see them now.'

'Like the wolf s in Red Riding Hood, my pet?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'No. Mysterious eyes. Will he come again?' she replied.

'If you would like to see him, my darling.'

'I think I should. He soothed me strangely when I was frightened by those bells.'

Accordingly, when Dr. Hope called to inquire the following day, he was admitted to Aimée. He sat with her some time, during which he made himself master of the symptoms of her complaint. He assured her that, although a physician, he came as a friend, and had no intention of torturing her with medicine; but she must obey him implicitly, if she desired to be cured.

'I could not promise to obey any one but God implicitly,' she said simply, fixing her clear blue eyes upon him.

'Well, you will give up reading tracts for a time, and allow yourself to be carried down-stairs every afternoon. The drawing-room is quite a studio, and there are infinite romances on the table,' he urged.

'I could give up tracts for a time, because I have my Bible; but I do not care much for romances,' she said.

Dr. Hope perceived that he had a difficult patient; but he assured Sir Gilbert that, if he would commit her entirely to his care, he could cure her.

'I cannot promise you "even to the half of my kingdom," if you restore her,—for Butterfield tells me I can scarcely claim a third,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Still you shall be welcome to all that the General obligingly leaves me, with the exception of my psalteries and paint-brushes.'

Dr. Hope smiled amiably—did not refuse his first guinea—and was installed.

He soon found that he had a difficult case; but, being fond of his profession, he studied it *con amore.* He succeeded in winning Aimée's confidence, and by degrees induced her to submit to certain experiments which he believed might strengthen her. But he did not succeed in compelling her to relinquish any of the religious exercises which she believed of more moment even than recovery. However, he grew unusually interested in the beautiful child,—as he called her,—and devoted so much time to her that the General complained. It was not often that Dr. Hope had divided interests, or indeed any interests at all, so he was surprised at himself.

Sir Gilbert had believed that twenty years of absence had obliterated old loves and friendships; but he found himself mistaken. By degrees they revived and the associations of his youth returned with unaccountable persistence. Many friends whom he had fancied forgotten, recalled themselves to his memory, and he gradually discovered that it might be best, after all, to have a home. He began to think his fine old Tudor Court, with its handsome lodges, woods, park-land, gardens, lawns, and terraces, superior to his foreign châteaux, and to long to maintain it in its ancient state. He went amongst his tenants and the poor, taking Elinor with him, and won back the forfeited affection; but he did not attend to business, as Mr. Butterfield understood it. However, they were as yet early days, and the General was placable.

'What are Dr. Hope's parents like?' asked Aimée one morning of her father, who was standing opposite his easel, brush in hand, while Elinor was poring over an account-book.

'That reminds me that I have not paid the Squire a visit,' replied Sir Gilbert, dotting in a bit of carmine. 'Elinor, we will go this afternoon. You must come with me and see the old lady, for she was always good to your mother, and is a distant connection.'

'Yes, father,' said Elinor wearily, recommencing a column of figures that she had twice before attempted.

'I am afraid Dr. Hope is not religious, papa,' remarked Aimée. 'He is gentle and kind, and promises me rare flowers and ferns, and a little Scotch terrier, and does me strange good; but'— She paused.

'"If he were pious—he were perfect,"' laughed Sir Gilbert, looking at his sketch with an artistic air.

'I do not mean that, papa. But why is he not religious?' persisted Aimée.

'Perhaps Elinor will answer your question, my pet, when we have seen the surroundings of our exemplary Æsculapius. She is silent and observes—a rare thing in woman. I have counted the number of words—eleven in all that she has addressed to our incubus, the General; yet has she made a conquest. She allows our irreligious doctor to have all the art conversation to himself; yet does he well know that she is his superior—in that line, at least; and only yesterday, when we were calling at Elmhampton Park, she held young Dyce Pouncefort at her side by one turn of the head and three sentences, curtly put.'

'Dear father, if you talk so much nonsense, I shall never get through this,' interposed Elinor, glancing up, her finger on the line of figures.

'*Ma fille*, you are a consummate flirt—you must be aware of it; and I foresee trouble to myself, which, as you know, I dislike. Lady Clementina, however, looked on approvingly; and, although Dyce the second lisps and drawls slightly, I should prefer him to the General. Besides, he is heir to much property.'

'Like Boykin, papa!' sighed Aimée.

'Only his acres are unencumbered, Boykin's in—cloudland,' said Sir Gilbert, looking up at the sky, and speaking more thoughtfully than usual.

'They will not come right!' exclaimed Elinor, in despair. 'And I told Stokes I would keep a strict account.'

'Aimée, let us be silent,' laughed Sir Gilbert, resuming his drawing.

That afternoon he and Elinor walked to the Kennels, where Dr. Hope's father lived. It was an old-fashioned house, and derived its name from its moated and castellated kennels at the back, wherein was kept the best pack of hounds in the county. It was situated outside the village. They were shown into a large, untidy room, where an elderly man was sitting near a window, reading a newspaper.

'Here I am once more, Squire,' was Sir Gilbert's greeting.

'Gilbert, my boy, I said you would come,' cried the Squire, throwing down his paper and rising with difficulty. 'I've got a fit of gout, confound it! Is this your daughter? A true Oreburn. My son

Septimus was speaking of you the other day, young lady. Foreign parts haven't spoilt your looks.'

Elinor blushed.

'And she is the plain one of the family,' laughed Sir Gilbert.

'Handsome enough — handsome enough! My boys are all married but two—Nap and Sep—and have children by the dozen. Couldn't get either of 'em to be parson. Not dull enough, as I tell the Vicar when he comes twice a-year to preach me a sermon; but Sep is parson and clerk, doctor and patient, all in one. The rest farm and hunt and spend money. I've much ado to keep 'em all. Good boys in the main, nevertheless.'

Mr. Hope of the Kennels, or 'the Squire,' as he was called, was a Radical Reformer. He was said to be a man of ideas by people who, catching at a term, as a spider at a fly, mesh it until it is piecemeal. One of his 'ideas' was that he would mend the system of teaching by not teaching his sons at all; Nature was to be their instructor, and they should know nothing of religion or books. The ancient philosophers who brought up a child apart from mankind, in order to discover the primal language, interpreted its first word, 'Becca,' as 'Bread;' and Mr. Hope found, in like manner, that his boys could ask for their food, which was about all they could do. They could till the ground and hunt, like Abel and Nimrod, and little more. So he changed his 'ideas,' and sent the younger to school. He was, perhaps, better pleased with the instruction given at Dr. Smart's academy than at Dame Nature's training college, for Septimus proved a genius.

He came in while his father and Sir Gilbert were discussing old times, and Elinor was looking into a large old-fashioned garden.

'How is Mrs. Hope? Shall I not see her?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'I always forget her,' said the Squire. 'She is confined to her room by rheumatic gout, and does nothing but grumble from morning to night. Sep, take Miss Oreburn up to your mother, and introduce her.'

Dr. Hope obeyed unwillingly. He and Elinor found Mrs. Hope in a large sitting-room that overlooked the garden. She was seated near one of its two windows, in a chintz-covered easy-chair, and had a table before her, littered with yarn, stockings, and knitting-needles. She had on a flowered dressing-gown and high cap, out of which looked prominent hard features and sharp eyes. When Dr. Hope introduced Elinor, he apologised for the untidy state of the apartment.

'You should have prepared me to receive an Oreburn,' said his mother fiercely. 'Excuse my rising. I am tied by rheumatism to this seat. Sep, can't you find a chair?'

While he was looking for one, Elinor, having shaken hands with the old lady, sat down on the low window-seat. She cast about for something to say, and remarked on the beauty of the garden and picturesqueness of the distant spire.

'We had a Breton château once, with just such a garden,' she added.

'I hate foreign parts and foreigners,' rejoined the old lady. 'It was high time for Sir Gilbert to return. You are not like your mother. She was a rare beauty.'

'I am glad you knew my mother,' said Elinor.

'I should think I did know her, to my cost! My eldest son was one of the poor fools who fell in love with her beauty; the General another. But she must be My Lady. Better she had married my boy, for she offended your grandfather past redemption.'

'It was a pity he was so bitter,' remarked Elinor.

'Oh, for that much, the Hopes were as proud as the Oreburns. Their land was their own, without a mortgage on it; and they had plenty of money. You'll see that Jane Moneypenny won't call at the Court. Yes, I am your mother's father's first cousin, and the Squire is my cousin once removed, and your Aunt Moneypenny is my cousin once removed, and you are my cousin twice removed, so my children are your cousins three times removed.'

'Cousins germane, but not German,' said the doctor, his eyes meeting Elinor's. 'We know our relationship. *C'est trop d'honneur.*'

Elinor blushed and bowed rather haughtily.

'English is good enough for me,' said Mrs. Hope snappishly. 'But I daresay you are as clever as Sep, Miss Oreburn, and talk that gibberish like a jack frog.'

'I naturally speak French, for I was born and educated abroad. I think my father is waiting for me,' said Elinor, rising.

'You are in a great hurry--everybody is. You needn't look at me that way, Sep, for you know that, as soon as any of you come in, you want to be out again.'

'Miss Oreburn will not have an exalted opinion of us, mother, said the doctor, knitting his smooth brows.

'She may then, for you're the best doctor in the county, and cure every one—even the General. He's sharp enough for anything, Miss Oreburn, and sings and plays and spouts for penny readings, as they call 'em, till one would think he was going on the stage.'

'That must be useful in the country,' said Elinor, suppressing a smile, and taking leave of the old lady.

When they returned to the dining-room, they found two other visitors. Elinor was not introduced to them, but liked their appearance. One was an animated young girl, the other a tall, gentlemanlike-looking young man. She remarked particularly that when Dr. Hope saw them, he made an impatient movement, and said, 'How unlucky!' Still he met the young lady with some eagerness. She coloured deeply when he shook hands with her, and seemed to throw off palpable embarrassment by saying in a lively way,—

'It is quite wonderful to find you at home. One never expects to meet you anywhere but at the Manor.'

'Or at the Castle,' he replied meaningly.

Elinor, as young ladies will, at once thought that here was decidedly 'a case,' but pitied the girl likely to become a daughter-in-law of the Squire and his wife.

When Sir Gilbert rose to go, rather hastily, as Elinor thought, he bowed distantly, and for him haughtily, to these young people. Elinor made a slight movement of adieu, and met the young man's eyes. They were grey, and struck her as deep and sensible—indeed, she had seen no one as yet whose appearance pleased her so much. He bowed gravely, and she returned it. Her movements were always graceful and dignified, and both he and Dr. Hope looked at her admiringly as she followed her father from the room. She thought she heard the Squire say, 'Why didn't you speak to her and shake hands?—but she's as proud as Lucifer.' As soon as she was out of the house, Sir Gilbert said,—

'Those good-looking young people have the honour of being connections of Mr. Moneypenny's, and are staying at the Castle. The Squire introduced them to me, but fortunately you escaped. Their name is Maxwell. I trust we shall not fall in with them again. It was my fault. I might have called at the Kennels without you. I cannot think why I took you there.'

'We are not likely to meet them. I suppose they would not speak if we did, as your manner was so distant,' sighed Elinor. 'But they are particularly nice-looking, and seem to be gentlefolks. I wish we knew them. What relations are they of Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny?'

'Nephew and niece, I believe. Their father was a clergyman. You need not look so pathetic, but we will certainly have no doings with that family. Indeed, the Tyrian desires none, and doubtless considers antiquity far below profit. He is right, and let us be thankful that he affects us as little as we do him.'

Sir Gilbert was resolute in his intention of keeping apart from his wife's sister and her connections; but Elinor and Aimée wished to know their mother's family. As Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny had neither called nor made any effort at reconciliation, there seemed little chance of their meeting. This encounter with Mr. Maxwell and his sister roused Elinor's curiosity and interest, and her father was vexed to perceive that she would have liked to make their acquaintance. A pair of deep grey eyes haunted her as she walked silently by Sir Gilbert's side, and she found herself wondering whether the soul beneath them were as eloquent as they.

'We may as well look in at the Lodge and Vicarage as we return,' said Sir Gilbert, as they approached some iron gates flanked by walls, above which grew a luxuriant laurel hedge.

The Lodge was a pretty, well-kept place, with verandah, lawn, and gardens redolent of perfume. Miss Whiston and Mrs. Owler were at home. The latter was a fine lady, poor and proud, affecting youth, and dressed in an elegant costume, elaborately trimmed with a coarse lace of her own manufacture. She was a great contrast to the voluble and florid Miss Whiston, who protected her friend, after the manner of a first-form boy who fights for his fag. After General Arlington had called at the Court, Mrs. Owler had called, and she was profuse in her expressions of pleasure at seeing Sir Gilbert and Elinor on the present occasion.

'I wanted to propose that you should be on our school committee, Miss Oreburn,' she said elegantly. 'Also that you should kindly interest yourself in the clothing club, and take the lead in our reading society. You will be able to recommend the last foreign works.'

'I am afraid I should not understand; but I should be glad to learn,' replied Elinor, frightened.

'You forget that we have come home to retrench, and that your cousin, the General, holds our purse-strings,' put in Sir Gilbert.

'Oh, Miss Oreburn will easily untie them,' interrupted Miss Whiston. 'He talks of nothing but Miss Oreburn—Miss Oreburn! But then he takes fancies to every new belle, and thinks them angels for a few months.'

'The gay Lothario! You see you must not be conceited, Elinor, said Sir Gilbert.

'His last *adorata* was Lizzie Maxwell,' continued Miss Whiston. Always the youngest. I suppose you have not met her? She is inclined to be fast, but is a good deal admired. We are rather expecting her and her brother to afternoon tea. You will stay, Miss Oreburn?'

'I think not,' Sir Gilbert replied, rising, and taking leave. But they encountered Mr. and Miss Maxwell at the gate, and, while Sir Gilbert saluted them stiffly, Elinor once more met the grey eyes.

They passed on, and finally arrived at the Vicarage, where Sir Gilbert was pleased to accept the cup of tea he had declined at the Lodge. He had become very friendly with Mr. Tenderton, and had forgotten his wife's mission.

Mrs. Tenderton, however, never forgot it, and was always looking for opportunities of introducing it. She was made happy to-day. While Sir Gilbert was talking earnestly to the Vicar concerning the reported death of Mr. George Arlington, Mr. and Miss Maxwell walked in through the window opening to the garden.

'Again!' muttered Sir Gilbert, and 'Again!' thought Elinor.

'How d'ye do, Lizzie? Willie, when did you come down? How did you leave your mother? Miss Oreburn—Mr. and Miss Maxwell—Sir Gilbert Oreburn,' dashed out Mrs. Tenderton, and so accomplished another part of the said mission.

There was no escape this time.

'We are regularly dodging you,' said Miss Maxwell to Elinor. 'Quite unintentionally, though; for we thought you went through the park. But fate favours one sometimes, and I have been dying to meet you.'

She was a handsome, bright, fashionable-looking girl, evidently fresh from a London *modiste's*. Elinor had seen no one so well-dressed since she passed through Paris.

'I am also glad,' she said shyly. 'You are at the Castle, I think?'

'Yes; and you know there is war to the death between Castle and Court,' returned the lively young lady. 'But ours is not really a castle—only a great square country-house.'

'I have seen it from a distance,' said Elinor.

'I am so thankful to see you together,' said Mrs. Tenderton, with a happy smile, while Sir Gilbert reminded Elinor it was nearly dinner-time.

Shaking hands with the Vicar and his wife, and bowing a shade less haughtily to the young people, Sir Gilbert walked out through the window, followed by Elinor and the Vicar.

Elinor had again met the grey eyes, and this third time the meeting was accompanied by a 'good morning' on either side, while Miss Maxwell nodded and smiled.

'We shall soon have perfect harmony in the parish,' said Mrs. Tenderton to her husband that evening.

But an event was about to occur which was likely sadly to interfere with that good lady's good intentions.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNWELCOME GUEST.

THE piano had arrived, and the music-room was furbished up for its reception. One of the many apartments of the Court had been so named for generations, and hither Sir Gilbert brought his psalteries as it was his pleasure to call his stringed instruments. It was bright, although the furniture was old, and the blue damask faded. Its windows opened out upon a terrace, whence other terraces of turf led to a garden below. Both room and garden had been the favourite resorts of Sir Gilbert's mother, and he rejoiced to find that his children took to the place naturally. True, the terrace-turf and garden-beds had been long untended ; but they and the room enshrined memories, pleasant if sad, and Elinor was doing her best to brighten them. Care had come to her young, but she found the kindest and most sympathetic of aids and advisers in the steward.

It was a May evening. The sun was beginning to set, and his rays fell on terraces and garden, lighting up the foliage, kindling the trailing flowers, and casting a rose-tint on the hills, and on the grey-blue of the river. The song-birds were chanting vespers, the rooks cawing in their windy dormitories, the restless cuckoo uttering her good-night, and the wood-pigeons cooing in their leafy chapels.

Elinor was joining this chorus. She was playing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, as people sometimes play in the twilight of a still evening. She did not know that her father and Aimée were listening intently, for when she began they had been reading. The one in an easy-chair, the other on her sofa, were gazing tenderly at the dying day, and drinking in every trickling drop of the murmuring stream of melody.

Elinor knew how to play, for not only had she music in her soul, but she had studied it assiduously abroad under the best masters. She had wandered through the intricacies of Mendelssohn and the perplexities of Bach ; but Beethoven and Mozart were her favourite composers. She was usually shy of performing before others, particularly her father, who was a *connoisseur* in art, and himself no mean musician, but on this particular evening she forgot herself in her music, and was rewarded as she most cared to be. When she paused, Sir Gilbert rose, and, taking the delicate hand which had played so well, kissed it approvingly. There was a touch of the Sir Charles Grandison in him, and every woman received his attention, though he was devoted only to the memory of one. He was as courteous to his daughters as to the rest of their sex, and his complimentary salute called up a blush on Elinor's cheeks as radiant as if he had been her lover.

'This is like heaven ! If only we could always be so happy !' broke in Aimée.

'Snatches of Paradise are welcome, if fleeting. Play on,' returned Sir Gilbert.

Elinor wandered off to Schubert, and found herself on the banks of the mill of the *Schöne Müllerin.* Sir Gilbert began to hum it, and

Aimée joined with a weak but sweet voice. The sun travelled gradually on his western journey, and twilight began. The peace of the little party was perfect, but, like all perfection, did not last. Elinor was performing a soft cadence, answered by the last trill of a blackbird, when the hall-bell rang.

'We descend already from heaven to earth, my pet,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Who can it be at this hour?'

'Perhaps it is Dr. Hope, come to assure himself that I am downstairs,' replied Aimée, smoothing her white dress.

'Well, my Baronet, what is the next move?' asked Sir Gilbert as Tom appeared.

'A letter, please, sir; a woman and child brought it, and are waiting in the hall for an answer.'

'Who are they?'

'Strangers, sir—furreigners, in black. Very queer-looking, please, sir.'

'Ask them to wait while I read the letter.'

Sir Gilbert took the missive to a window facing Aimée's couch. As he read by the fading light, his daughters watched him. They soon heard exclamations of surprise, followed by, 'Poor fellow!—how strange!—how unfortunate! His child!—impossible! My promise!—could I have promised?'

Elinor rose, and went to her father's side.

'I have committed some new piece of folly,' he said, his manner agitated. 'This letter is from George Arlington, the General's unfortunate brother. I will read it to you.'

He read as follows, making out the writing with difficulty:—

'MY DEAR OLD GILBERT,—When this reaches you, I shall have escaped from persecution, and my weary life will be done. You promised to take care of my child when I was dead, and to make all right with Austin. I am dying. Sister Mary, an angel of light, will bear my precious one to you. Receive her for my sake, and commend her to my brother's care. I forgive him as I pray to be forgiven. You were ever true to me—may God bless you! Pity and love my Fay.—Your wretched but penitent friend,

'GEORGE A.'

When Sir Gilbert ceased, there was silence, broken by Aimée.

'*Ange de père*, how pitiful it is!' she sobbed.

'Pitiful indeed! But what am I to do?' he said in a broken voice.

Simultaneously a piercing cry echoed from the hall.

'It must be the child; I will go to her,' said Elinor, and went.

At first she could not find those she sought, for twilight was deepening; but at last, in the shadow, she perceived the spectral figures of a woman and child seated on two high-backed chairs. As she advanced into the hall, the cry became louder and louder, and the child appeared to rise and fling herself upon the woman. Elinor paused a moment, half terrified, then again moved towards them. The woman tried to rise as she approached, but the child prevented her by clinging to her and screaming,—

'*Je ne veux pas!—je ne veux pas!*'

'Be wise, I entreat you, Fay,' said the woman in indifferent French; then, turning to Elinor, added in English, 'This is Mademoiselle de Saint Ange—I am Sister Mary.'

Elinor perceived that she was dressed as a Sister of Charity. The child continued to cling to her, while the hall echoed with her shrieks, which brought Sir Gilbert, who joined the group. The cries and the '*Je ne veux pas!*' were redoubled.

'Are you my old friend's little girl?' said Sir Gilbert, laying his hand on a large black hat—for the face underneath was buried in the Sister's lap.

A pitiful scream was the only answer.

'She does not understand English,' said the Sister.

Sir Gilbert and Elinor began to speak in French, but their words were drowned with the cry of '*Non, non, non! Je ne veux pas!*'

'You had better let her alone,' said Sister Mary.

Sir Gilbert begged them to come into the music-room, and they dragged the shrieking child in amongst them. The Sister sat down with difficulty, for the child still clung to her. She released herself, however, at last, and the little girl planted herself, sobbing bitterly, behind her chair. They were near a west window, half in light, half in shade, and a flickering ray from the sunset fell on them. The Sister's face, which was very pale, seemed to start out from beneath her poke bonnet and long veil; but of the child nothing was visible save a large crushed black hat and black stockings.

Sir Gilbert placed himself near the pair, and asked, in a suppressed but kindly voice, for some explanation. The Sister told him briefly all she knew. She said that she had been on a mission, and was returning to England *viâ* Dinan, when the landlord of the hotel at which she was about to sleep asked her to see a sick man, who was inquiring for some English person. She was taken to M. de Saint Ange, whom she found in a dying state. Although reputed French, he spoke to her in English, and begged her to take his child to England with her, where, he said, he had a brother and influential friends. She hesitated, but remained with him as nurse. He only survived a few days, during which she was convinced of his sincerity, and promised to execute his last wishes. At her request, he wrote and directed the letter she brought with her, but, beyond giving her to understand that he was English, and the child's mother French, he made no confidences—indeed, he was too ill to talk much. She read to him, and prayed with him, and had reason to believe he was penitent. He refused to see either Catholic priest or Protestant clergyman, but said he had faith in his Saviour's atonement. His child was with him day and night, and their devotion to one another could not be surpassed. His confidence in Sir Gilbert Oreburn seemed unlimited, and when she pressed for information, he assured her that his friend would do all that was right.

'I certainly will, God helping me!' put in Sir Gilbert.

After his death, the Sister inquired of the landlord concerning him, who knew nothing of his antecedents. He had been a few weeks at the hotel, and was in debt, but the landlord said that he pitied the child too much to insist on payment. They sold such of his effects as were saleable, and buried him, retaining all that could be of use to his little girl. Her grief was pitiable, and she was still inconsolable. They tried to make her believe that she was to be taken to a good uncle, but she had already conceived such a hatred of him that she shrieked at his name—indeed, she had done little else but scream and cry since her father's death. The Sister scarcely knew how they had got her to England, since coaxing and threats had been equally unavailing. The child seemed to have been much neglected, and to know and care for no one and nothing but her father.

When Sister Mary had concluded her narrative, there was a short silence. Sir Gilbert, much perplexed, was trying to recall his last meeting with his old friend.

'It was at Dinan,' he said at last. 'I scarcely think I promised anything, but I met the poor fellow by chance, and took him to a restaurant. I had seen him twice before, at long intervals. I remember that he alluded to the General, and said that, although he had been cruel to him, he believed he would be kind to his child. He passed for a Frenchman, and spoke in French. He was then out of health, and evidently wretchedly poor. I think he said, in a rambling sort of way, "I shall send her to you first, Gilbert, and you will see her righted; but don't say you have met me. I shall not part with my child while I live." This is all I recollect. I daresay I said 'Yes," and thoughtlessly led him to believe that I would undertake the thankless office of mediator. It is my usual luck and customary carelessness, but we must make the best of it. How can we pacify and conciliate the child?'

Sir Gilbert looked towards the little girl. Sleep had overpowered her, and she had sunk down upon the floor. The sun had set, and the moon had risen, so that there was a flood of pale light where twilight had been. A tear-stained cheek and a white arm and knee

'This is Mademoiselle de Saint Ange—I am Sister Mary.'—*Page* 47.

were revealed by the moonbeams, and gleamed out from a heap of crumpled black. Sir Gilbert rose and stooped over her.

'Poor orphan!—poor innocent!' he murmured, gazing on the long black lashes that rested on the pale cheek.

Elinor came forward and asked the Sister what they had better do with her.

'Bed would be best, she is so tired,' was the reply. 'If I can ensure her a welcome here, I will return to the inn where I left her little box, sleep there, and proceed to London to-morrow.'

Elinor said that they could not allow either of the travellers to leave the house that night, and it was settled they should sleep at the Court.

Meanwhile, Sir Gilbert had rung for lights, and had taken the heap of crumpled black in his arms. He uplifted the child gently, but not so gently as to prevent her partially awaking. She half opened her eyes, black as the night, and cried, in a tone that pierced all hearts,—

'*Mon père!—je veux mon père!*'

'Thou hast him, my little one. He is here,' whispered Sir Gilbert in French, and pressed his lips on her cheek.

She put up her hand and stroked his face. A smile flickered on her lips, and the long black lashes fell again. She murmured '*Cher, cher!*'

'Let me kiss her,' said Aimée, her face wet with tears.

Sir Gilbert carried her to the couch, and as Aimée kissed her, she again murmured '*Cher.*'

'We will love her, *petit papa*,' sobbed Aimée.

'Bring her to my room, father,' said Elinor; then to the Sister, 'If you will remain here a few minutes, you can also come to her. My room shall be prepared for you both.'

The Sister began to apologise and remonstrate, but Elinor accompanied her father to her own apartment.

Sir Gilbert laid the little girl tenderly on the bed. She was a gaunt child, whose age they could not guess.

'*Où es-tu, mon père?*' she muttered.

'Here, my child. Here, my little one,' whispered Sir Gilbert, stooping over her.

She clasped his hand and slept again, with the same word, '*cher.*' He tried in vain to withdraw his hand.

'Leave us, Elinor, and go to the Sister,' he said.

He kneeled down by the bed and contemplated the child. She was strangely pale, and but for crimson lips would have been colourless. The long black hair and eyelashes contrasted with the white face; and the thin cheeks told of privation. Her breast still heaved with latent sobs like a half-stilled sea, and she started nervously as she slept. Sir Gilbert knelt on. Lost in thought, pity, and prayer, he forgot all but the orphan thus brought to him. At last he tried again to release his hand; but she muttered '*Où vas-tu, mon père?*' and opened her eyes wide upon him. They filled with an expression of terror, as she saw a stranger. Sir Gilbert hastily extinguished the light, and, putting his arms about her, whispered to her in French. With pardonable equivocation he said her father was near and she must sleep. He heaped endearing epithets upon her, until the wearied mind yielded, and she believed them. Putting her arm round his neck, she muttered, '*Oui, mon bien-aimé, je m'endors. Je t'ai, n'est-ce-pas? Cher! cher!*' and so she fell asleep in his arms.

CHAPTER VII.

UNA TAMES THE LION.

EARLY the following morning Sir Gilbert and his household were again startled by shrieks. The child had escaped from the Sister and was rushing about the house. Without frock, shoes, or stockings she ran through the interminable passages, down the stairs and into the great hall, while the place resounded with the cry, '*Mon père! mon père!*'

The servants appeared in consternation. Arbiter managed to catch her, but she turned upon her fiercely, gave her a blow with her fist, and wrenched herself loose. The others dodged her in and out of the screens and chairs, but she evaded them with menaces and screams. At last she pounced upon Tommy, who stood in the doorway contemplating her with astonishment.

'*Hibou! que regardes-tu?*' she cried, gave him a thrust with both hands, and darted past him.

He pursued her into the kitchen, where his mother was cooking an omelette. The savoury and accustomed odour stayed her, and she cried, '*Donnez-moi! Donnez-moi!*'

'There's gibberish!' said Stokes, shaking her off.

'She wants something to eat,' cried clever Tommy, taking up a plate and emptying a large spoonful of the omelette from the frying-pan into it while his mother was engaged with the child.

He was rewarded by a box on the ear from Stokes, which caused Mademoiselle Fay to rush at that worthy woman and administer a kick so efficacious that she was compelled to turn from her son's ear to her own leg. Meanwhile the child began to talk loudly and rapidly in French, calling Stokes many naughty names, and promising Tommy a franc when she got one. Then she broke forth again into her piteous call for her father. Tommy, still rubbing his ear, pointed to the omelette, sniffed, wriggled dramatically, and succeeded in attracting her attention. She turned her little bare feet towards it, and set to work at once, eating voraciously, heedless of Stokes's intimation that she would scald herself to death, and rejecting a proffered spoon. She accepted, however, a piece of toast purloined by her friend Tommy, which she used artistically.

She was a strange little figure, standing there on tiptoe before the big table, in the enormous raftered kitchen. She was very dark and sallow. Her hair, black as night, was cropped short in front, and nearly touched her curved eyebrows, but hung in a thick mass at her back. It was so long that it covered the short petticoat, and almost reached her legs. Her eyes were black, sharp, and lustrous, and seemed to dart from her wan face like fireworks out of darkness. The only touch of colour was on her lips, which were of richest crimson, and 'like to a double cherry;' while the teeth within were truly 'gates of ivory.' The arms and legs were thin, long, and brown, the hands and feet small.

'She is a born gipsy escaped from the woods,' said Stokes, and gave her more omelette.

'I'll go and say she's quiet,' said Tommy, stealing off.

He did so, and told Sir Gilbert that 'she was a-eating of his omelette.'

'Let her eat, and we will gladly say her grace,' was the reply.

'What can we do with her?' asked Elinor, perplexed by this fresh difficulty.

Sister Mary said she had better be left where she was, so long as she was quiet, and that she was more accustomed to kitchens than drawing-rooms. Elinor told Tommy to amuse her, took the Sister to the breakfast-room, and had a long consultation with her—the result of which seemed to be that General Arlington would have a difficult task to manage his young niece. Elinor's fears were aroused for her father; for she knew him well enough to be sure that if any obstacles arose he would not hesitate to protect the child, even if he offended her uncle.

When he came down to breakfast, his words verified her doubts. He told the Sister that he would perform his promise and commit the little girl into the tender keeping of her uncle, and that under no circumstances should she be forsaken. He had no doubt of her identity, and would on no account detain the Sister from her duties. She wanted to return at once to London, and Sir Gilbert ordered the car to be ready to take her to the station for the next train. Sister Mary said she should like to see the child, but would not wish her good-bye, lest she should arouse her grief. The astute Tommy, who was receiving the orders for the car, suggested that the kitchen door might be left ajar, and that she could thus be seen without seeing the spectators.

'She was a-acting of a play when I left her, please, sir, and, when my bell rung, tried to hinder my answering.'

'On no account leave her again, my Baronet,' said Sir Gilbert. 'I even relinquish your invaluable services for her amusement. Restrain that shriek, which has pierced, like unpremeditated malice, to the marrow of my mercy.'

'Yes, please, sir,' said Tommy. 'Shall I leave the door ajar, please, sir?'

'By all means, and I will take a crust of bread and eat it to the odour of mine omelette, as the poor souls do at the doors of Parisian restaurants. It appears that I shall have no other savour of that dainty this morning.'

'No, please, sir,' said Tommy, disappearing.

After breakfast, Elinor led the way to the kitchen, and Sir Gilbert and Sister Mary followed. They found the door ajar, and peeped in.

'Poor little Fay! What a strange child she is!' ejaculated the Sister.

The scene had changed. The child, Stokes, and Tommy appeared to be performing a three-handed reel. She was gesticulating and attitudinising, talking volubly, and vainly endeavouring to make her companions understand her. The burden of her speech was omelettes, kitchens, cooks, *garçons*, *bonbons*, a château, a grand lady, and her father. Waving her arms, swaying her head, pointing now here, now there, her little feet pattered to and fro. Tommy, in his zeal to amuse, imitated her movements and speech, and bade his mother do the same. Stokes nodded, waddled, pointed fingers and toes, and muttered some unintelligible jargon.

'*Qu'ils sont bêtes! Je m'en vais. Mon père! où es-tu, mon père?* she cried at last, and turned suddenly towards the door, where she perceived the listeners.

She ran back to Stokes, and threw her arms round her, appealing for protection from the wicked foreigners. Sister Mary followed and spoke to her in broken French, entreating her to be calm, and assuring her that she was with friends.

'I want them not. I will not have them. Render me my father—my father!' was the only answer, as she clung to Stokes, and looked fiercely at Sir Gilbert, who came to her and told her gently that Sister Mary was about to leave them, and wished to embrace her.

'I go with her! I stay not here! You have lied, you! You promised me my father, my father!'

'Thou shalt have him if thou wilt be wise and embrace the Sister,' said Sir Gilbert, retreating from the piteous cry.

She sprang upon Sister Mary's neck, shrieking, 'I embrace thee! But thou wilt not go. Remain with the poor Fay of Monsieur de Saint Ange!'

Her mood had changed, and she wept. The Sister kissed and blessed her, while Stokes rubbed her eyes and Tommy blubbered. This attracted her, and she disengaged herself from the Sister, and ran to Tommy.

'You cry not, I say! Give to him some omelette.'

Taking advantage of the diversion, Sir Gilbert and the others left the kitchen. Jim and the car were ready, and Sister Mary's modest portmanteau was in. She went to bid Aimée good-bye.

'You will be kind to the child, and tell her of God and heaven,' she said.

'I will do what I can,' replied Aimée, kissing her.

Sir Gilbert and Elinor were on the doorstep.

'I shall return her to you if the General declines the honour,' he said.

'We will take her in,' smiled the Sister, as they all shook hands cordially, and Jim drove off.

'A fair woman in unlovely garb. Why should virtue so disfigure herself?' said Sir Gilbert. 'Nuns are nuns, but these Protestant travesties are like a poor copy of a Vandyck—wanting originality and depth. *Ma fille*, my fate pursues me. We come home to retrench, and I begin life virtuously as a Socrates. I am amiable to mine enemy, a pattern to my establishment, a disciple of my Vicar, and yet I am not rewarded. *Au contraire*, poor George's child is thrust upon me, like an honour undeserved and undesired. What are we to do with her, and what will Butterfield say?

'What will the General say?' asked Elinor sadly.

'You must be the salve for the wounds I inflict. You have but to glance at him and he yields. *Du reste*, let him send the child to school, or to a modiste's where she may learn to oil and curl his *toupet*. They say he wears one, and it fits him admirably! The French are experts, and she is every inch a Frank. Let us go and fetch her.'

They found her sobbing out her grief on Stokes's knees. She was still talking rapidly, and Stokes and Tommy were replying in a jargon that they fondly believed to be French. When she saw Sir Gilbert and Elinor, the passionate cry for her father began again.

'If thou wilt be wise, perhaps he will come to thee,' said Sir Gilbert.

'I will never, never be wise again,' she screamed.

'Little girls should not scream and frighten the crows,' said Elinor sententiously.

The child made a face at her.

'Your moral lesson fails, *ma fille*,' said Sir Gilbert, laughing.

Fay turned her great eyes fiercely upon him.

'How dare you mock at me? I will not live with you. You are my wicked uncle.'

'I have not that honour, Mademoiselle. He resembles you. I am much handsomer, and have not the face of a bat, as you have at present.'

The idea surprised her, and she stayed her screams and tears to examine Sir Gilbert's face.

'Ah, Monsieur, if I am the bat, you are the cockatoo!' she said, grimacing.

'*Bien*, *ma petite*, we understand one another. Night and day. Now will you come with me?'

'No, I will not.'

'Then we must leave you to the owls!

Sir Gilbert moved away.

'There is a golden-haired fairy up-stairs who will make you wise. Will you come to her?' said Elinor.

'Monsieur calls me the bat. He wants me not,' she said, still looking at Sir Gilbert.

'If you will come with us, the fairy shall give you a doll with a silk dress and golden girdle,' whispered Elinor.

'I hate her!' responded Fay.

'We love our golden-haired fairy,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Adieu, Mademoiselle. We go to seek her. *Allons*, *ma fille*.'

They left the kitchen, pausing in the passage. Little feet came pattering after them.

'Take me to the golden-haired fairy!' she sobbed.

She would not give them her hand, but followed them to the hall. Here they met Arbiter, who had been roaming about all the morning with shoes and socks.

'Go away, monster!' cried Fay, making a dart at her and pinching her arm.

'Incorrigible brat! I'll teach you to pinch me,' said Arbiter, taking her by the shoulders and shaking her.

Fay shrieked, and, escaping, ran half-way up the stairs. Then, looking back at Arbiter, she clenched her fist, and, making a horrible grimace, said with a serio-comic air,—

'I hate you, old woman!'

'There's no peace for this family,' muttered Arbiter, while Sir Gilbert and Elinor followed Fay, who was once more calling for her father.

Elinor opened the door of Aimée's room, and beckoned to her, saying, 'The fairy is here.' She stood some time uncertain, then crept in after Elinor. Keeping close to her, but not touching her, she peeped at Aimée. But when Elinor advanced towards Aimée, she paused in the middle of the room irresolute, then stole to its farthest corner, where she stood at bay like a terrified deer. The black eyes were full of tears, the wan face was flushed with passion, the long hair was disordered.

'Come and embrace me, little one. I love thee much,' said Aimée in a gentle voice, half rising from her couch.

A moment's hesitation, and she advanced a step, her finger on her lips.

'Have no fear, for I love thee,' said Aimée.

She stole round the room by the wall on tiptoe, now gazing at Aimée, now looking furtively at Sir Gilbert and Elinor. Aimée smiled and beckoned, saying softly,—

'We will not harm thee. Approach. See, we are French like thee. We will be thy sisters, little one, and love thee well.'

Her finger still on her lips her eyes wandering about her, she stole on until at last she reached the foot of the couch, and fixed her terrified, appealing gaze on Aimée, who opened her arms. But she did not run into them. She only whispered,—

'Thou art not Fée! Thou art an angel! I am the dark wicked Fée.'

Big tears rolled down her cheeks, and a softened expression stole over her face. Aimée pointed to a low stool by the side of her couch, and she crept round and sat down.

'How wise thou art! What is thy name, my little one?' said Aimée, letting her hand drop into the child's lap, who took it, stroked it, and murmured '*Chère!*'

'Fée. They call me Fée.'

'But thou hast other names?'

'Yes, assuredly. Félicité Gabrielle de Saint Ange. And what is thy name?'

'Aimée.'

'And thy other names?'

'Oreburn. Hast thou heard it before?

'Never. I may call thee Aimée. "Beloved." Thou art an angel and not a fairy, *chère*, *chère*.'

'And thou wilt love me, and be wise, my child?'

'I promise not to be wise, but I will love thee. *Chère.*

'Una has tamed the lion. Let us leave her to take out the claws,' whispered Sir Gilbert to Elinor, and they left Aimée and Fay together.

CHAPTER VIII.

GEORGE NEVER MARRIED.

'THERE is Butterfield! How can I face him, Elinor? I feel like a schoolboy about to be flogged, and his grave looks will be the cat-o'-nine-tails to the shoulders of my soul,' said Sir Gilbert, as Mr. Butterfield passed the library window.

He came in.

'My dear Butterfield, my star is in the ascendant, as usual. The unlucky Fate that lives in that capricious planet will not let me alone.'

'What is the matter, Sir Gilbert?'

Sir Gilbert detailed the event of the previous day. Mr. Butterfield looked grave, and said the General would be furious. He knew more of the circumstances than Sir Gilbert, for he had been engaged with General Arlington's lawyers when his brother disgraced himself. The facts were these:

George Arlington had been wild from his youth, and his father and brother had thwarted him, endeavouring to control him. He squandered the small income allowed him, got into debt, and failed to induce his relations to help him out of it. They were, perhaps, niggardly, and would have done better to aid him; but they did not. He forged his father's name, and was obliged to flee from the country. Sir Gilbert had stood his friend, thus annoying the General. The father died soon afterwards; Sir Gilbert left England, and the name of George Arlington was gradually forgotten.

'They were always hard upon him,' said Mr. Butterfield. 'He would have reformed if they had been patient.'

'His reformation was like mine, I fear, Butterfield; always beginning, never reaching its end. He was about to reform when I saw him last, just as I am about to conciliate the General, and to retrench.'

Mr. Butterfield looked perplexed, and Elinor anxious. Sir Gilbert laughed, and shrugged his shoulders.

'If my legal advisers wear distrust so openly on their countenances, how am I to reform? In short, what am I to do, Butterfield?'

'I should think you had better take the child to the General at once, Sir Gilbert.'

'She would scream down his paternal inheritance about his rather elongated ears, Butterfield. Aimee has only just pacified her, and I am too thankful for peace to break it. Read her father's letter.'

Mr. Butterfield read it, and shook his head.

'His writing, apparently, but no signature. I wonder he ventures to appeal to his brother.'

'The approach of death smooths differences as it levels distinctions. What am I to do?' said Sir Gilbert.

'Let us consider a moment. Of course General Arlington must be made acquainted with this at once.'

'Butterfield, I have a confession to make,' interrupted Sir Gilbert. 'I have never returned his call. We have met him everywhere. No dinner seems perfect without him. And he has been civil to me, lavishing his "You knows" upon me in a truly confidential fashion; still I have not yet visited the Manor. He will ask me to dinner, and I would rather not partake of his venison. Besides, how can we return it? I could not invite him, as I have the rest, to our *pot-au-feu*.'

Elinor suggested that her father should make his call and explanations together.

'Perhaps Mr. Butterfield will go with you?' she added, hesitating.

'She thinks I shall be sheltered by your ægis,' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'It is fatiguing; but we will try the shield of the law against the sword of war. Will you come, Elinor?'

'Papa!' said Elinor, with an indignant gesture, and her head at its highest.

'If you looked at the General so, *ma fille*, it would be a *fait accompli*. Butterfield, what do you say to my making my mortgagee my son-in-law?'

'It might not be amiss,' said Butterfield, in a matter-of-fact way, while Elinor looked more indignant still.

When the car returned from the station, Sir Gilbert and Mr. Butterfield drove off to see the General.

Arlington Manor was about five miles from the Court. It was a large, handsome, modern house, built on land once belonging to the Oreburn family. Wealth was apparent in all its surroundings. The lodge and gates were faultless; the drive smooth as a bowling-green; the walks carefully gravelled; the lawns close-shorn and rolled, to the extinction of each 'wee, crimson-tippèd flow'r;' the gardens and greenhouses crowded with every plant in season; and the mansion itself the envy of the county.

When Sir Gilbert drove up to the door, he forgot both the General and his niece for the moment, in his delight at Tommy, who jumped importantly from the somewhat rickety vehicle, and gave a peal vigorous as that of the most distinguished footman. When it brought forth a pompous and powdered man, who said magnificently that the General was at home, Sir Gilbert remarked aside,—

'Look, Butterfield! The bull and the frog. I hope my Baronet will not burst. See how he swells!'

General Arlington received Sir Gilbert almost warmly, and seemed disposed to be friendly. Dr. Hope was with him; and the two gentlemen inquired, almost simultaneously, for the Miss Oreburns.

'My eldest daughter would be well, I think, but for the anxieties connected with her establishment,' replied Sir Gilbert. 'You will sympathise with her, General. My youngest is wonderfully better, thanks to some mesmeric or electric qualities you possess, Dr. Hope.'

The General rubbed his hands, the doctor bowed.

'A charming girl indeed,' exclaimed the former. 'We were just talking of her, and saying she was a most elegant, accomplished, unusual young lady, you know.'

'She will be much flattered,' returned Sir Gilbert. 'I have long intended to do myself the—hem—the—of returning your visit; but you know something of that old thief of time, my procrastination.'

'"Better late than never," you know,' said the General blandly.

'Then you don't agree with the elderly bachelor clergyman who told a celebrated bishop the other day that he was about to marry, adding facetiously, "Better late than never, my lord"—"Better never than late," replied the bishop, also a bachelor.'

'I don't agree with him,' said the General testily. 'It's an age of progress, you know, and one can't stand still.'

'A truly fatiguing age, General; though I rejoice to find you in so progressive a spirit, for I have to introduce to you an advanced specimen of our hastening race. I hear the women are outstripping the men in pace; and this is of the softer sex.'

'I hate fast women! My reason for admiring your daughter so much is that she is so peculiarly quiet and ladylike, you know.'

'Inoffensive? I understand. But my fast female is a child. Prepare for a surprise, General. It takes much to astonish me, but I confess to having been aroused. Last night, when my daughter was "discoursing sweet music" on a new piano,—which, I trust, you will obligingly allow her to retain,—an unbecomingly-attired lady brought me a little girl, together with a letter. The young lady is your brother George's daughter; the letter is from the poor fellow himself. He does me the honour of confiding his only child to me, preparatory to transferring her to your fraternal care.'

At this announcement, made with Sir Gilbert's customary nonchalance, General Arlington started up and faced him, exclaiming, in undisguised surprise,—

'My brother George! His only daughter! What do you mean?'

'Just what I have said. The young lady has slept and breakfasted at the Court, and now awaits your decision, with very impatient patience. The Sister has departed.'

'I don't believe a word of it. George was never married—never had a child. It is some imposture.'

The General grew red and excited. A strange expression altered Dr. Hope's face from smiling calm to frowning surprise.

'I think you brought the letter, Butterfield? Let the General read it, and his scepticism will vanish,' said Sir Gilbert, putting up his eyeglass, while General Arlington took the letter.

As he glanced through it, he turned pale, and his hand trembled. Dr. Hope, who was watching him, went to him, and begged, in a whisper, that he would not excite himself.

'Read it, Septimus,' he said, in a low tone.

Dr. Hope read it, and did not seem pleased with it.

'There is no signature. It is not like his writing,' he whispered.

'Of course it is not. It is a vile foreign trick, and they don't know my name. He was no more married than I am!' exclaimed General Arlington, his voice shaking with passion.

'Any sudden agitation may be serious,' said the doctor, glancing from the General to Sir Gilbert significantly.

'Fear of agitating so susceptible a patient alone prevented my bringing his niece, who, like her uncle, appears excitable replied Sir Gilbert, languidly taking up a book.

'Niece! uncle! what do you mean? I say, sir, George was never married. What business had you with him? By Jove! both he and you have been the banes of my life!' cried the General, stamping his foot.

'Ah, really! we unintentionally reversed that impeachment. But pray don't excite yourself, and I will tell you all I know of the poor fellow,' said Sir Gilbert.

'Poor fellow, indeed!' echoed the General, stamping about the room, while Sir Gilbert quietly gave an account of his various interviews with George Arlington.

As Sir Gilbert enlarged on his poverty and miserable appearance, the General paused and turned pale; but when he referred to the child, his irritation returned.

'Fetch that last letter of Aigret's, Septimus,' he said.

Dr. Hope left the room, and returned with a packet of papers.

'Give Sir Gilbert the one containing the account of my brother's death,' said the General authoritatively.

Dr. Hope gave Sir Gilbert a letter, which he opened and read. It was in French, dated from Paris, and reported that Mr. George Arlington had died at Charlemont some months back.

While Sir Gilbert was reading it, the General went to Mr. Butterfield, and asked him if he believed so ridiculous a story. That gentleman replied cautiously that he should be better able to give an opinion when he had seen the child; but that the writing appeared to be his brother's.

'Strange!' exclaimed Sir Gilbert, after more than once perusing the letter. 'I should have thought that even George, with all his capabilities, could scarcely die twice. This gentleman affirms that he cast off his mortal coil at Charlemont; the Sister that she watched his last moments at Dinan.'

'I have mourned him as dead four months, you know,' said the General, calming.

'Quite four months of needless grief. May I ask who is the writer of this letter?' inquired Sir Gilbert.

'One of my Paris agents. Aigret, you know. A highly respectable firm. They paid George his money quarterly. He always had it to the day, you know, when he either wrote for it, or called. Dr. Hope can bear me out.'

'Not necessary. Your word is sufficient, General. Besides, I think he mentioned the regularity of your *liberality*.'

The obtuse General did not appreciate the emphasis on the last word, though Dr. Hope showed by a peculiar smile that he did.

'Considering his conduct, I must say, I have done much for him,—I desire to be just,' remarked the General, oiling his conscience.

'Quite an Aristides. You will still have the happiness of holding the scales for the blind goddess in behalf of your niece,' said Sir Gilbert.

Again the General grew excited. Dr. Hope put one hand on his arm, and with a motion of the other towards Sir Gilbert, said that further agitation would surely bring on an attack of palpitation of the heart.

'The heart!' echoed Sir Gilbert. 'Still a heart? I wish *I* had one, General. I would not for words interfere with so susceptible an organ; but what am I to do with the niece? Will you come and see her to-morrow? We will prepare her for the interview. Come to luncheon. My daughter and our culinary divinity are wonderful at impromptu dishes, which, like the French, they improvise from nothing. That is your true improvisatore. Omelettes and curry are their *pièces de résistance*. By the way, our niece deprived me of my omelette this morning.'

Sir Gilbert's manner was, to say the least, provoking, and the General was livid, either with rage or spasm. He made sundry efforts to assure Sir Gilbert that if he were to see the girl a hundred times he would not acknowledge her; but Dr. Hope again interfered to stay his excitement; and Mr. Butterfield whispered to Sir Gilbert that it might be as well not to press the matter until General Arlington had thought it over. Then he turned to the General, and, with the tact of a lawyer, assured him that a few inquiries would probably suffice to clear up the mystery.

'If you were to inquire from this to doomsday, I should never believe that George was married, you know,' replied the General. 'And I would never acknowledge a chance child as his. I have had trouble enough with him, you know, and by Jove, if the disgraceful story of his life is raked up, I will'—

'Hush, General!' interposed Dr. Hope. 'May I be permitted to accompany him if he accedes to your request to-morrow?' he added aside to Sir Gilbert.

'By all means. *A demain* then, General,' said Sir Gilbert gaily. 'My daughters will entertain our—hem—our unwelcome visitor, until such time as you have seen her.'

Sir Gilbert and Mr. Butterfield departed, leaving the perturbed General to the care of his doctor.

'A beggar's brat to be thrust upon one by a fellow who has always been my enemy. I will not bear it, Septimus. Confound it! He shall rue the day. Perhaps to be my death by so sudden and unfeeling an announcement!'

'Pray be calm, General, and consider the consequences. *Do* take this little sedative.'

Dr. Hope presented a draught, always at hand. The General swallowed it.

'You would scarcely like to interrupt the pleasant relations now beginning to exist between the Manor and the Court,' continued the doctor, who had his private reasons for maintaining them.

'Confound the Court! Why not? The Court is mine.'

'Because agreeable society is good for you, and things are not yet sufficiently developed for ousting Sir Gilbert.'

'Sir Gilbert is a fool; his own enemy as well as mine.'

'No doubt of it, General; but he is in your power.'

''Pon my soul, I should think so, and he will not get out of it. If he worry me about that child, he shall find it out!'

The General began to fume and pace the room again. Dr. Hope put his hand gently on his arm. His touch was light, his hand delicate, his voice persuasive.

'You will lie down awhile and compose yourself. If you meet Sir Gilbert, you will need to appear indifferent, as this story must not get abroad. I will hint as much to Sir Gilbert and Miss Oreburn, if you will allow me.'

'Miss Oreburn! Ah! a charming girl. I would not annoy her, you know, though I should like to challenge her pig-headed father. I say, Septimus, I will have nothing to do with the child! Mark me, nothing, by Jove!'

CHAPTER IX.

FAY AND THE GENERAL.

THE subject nearest the heart is often the one most resolutely avoided. It was so at the luncheon, to which, after much discussion, General Arlington and Dr. Hope came. While Miss Fay was taxing Aimée's patience above-stairs, she was apparently ignored below. Sir Gilbert tried many subjects of conversation, but was generally unfortunate in hitting upon one that pleased the General, who, however, found consolation in Elinor. He was evidently much taken with her, and the stiffer and more reticent she showed herself, the more *empressé* he became. Sir Gilbert watched them with amusement.

'I declare, General, in spite of the heart, or owing to the heart, as may be, you grow younger every day,' he said. 'The waters of the Wye are more effectual than the German spas, after all. No wonder they have engraven on our Ross Hotel "*Ici l'on rajeunit.*"'

The General smiled complacently, and turned from Elinor to her ather, saying,—

'I take care of my health, you know, and don't wear myself out by wandering all over the world, as people do now-a-days. Not that you look old, Sir Gilbert, you know, and the Brunnen don't seem to have disagreed with you. What do you say, Miss Oreburn?' he added, turning to Elinor.

'I never think any one I care for old,' she replied, glancing at her ather; while the General appropriated her compliment complacently.

'Age is a chance of circumstance,' said Sir Gilbert. 'But we must begin to think of youth. We have reserved our *bonne bouche* for the last course, and kept your erratic niece as the olives to our wine. If you are quite ready, General, we will go into the library, where, I understand, my daughter has prepared a reception.'

General Arlington was divided between anger at the word niece and interest in Elinor. He gave Sir Gilbert to understand that he was at his service, then added,—

'Miss Oreburn could prepare nothing that was not agreeable.'

He looked at her so admiringly that Elinor coloured as she replied,—

'I have no reception. We thought it advisable to keep the little girl with my sister until after luncheon, and then to introduce her to you. She is very unhappy, and we cannot reconcile her to England.

'A great pity she ever came; I am sure you must think so,' returned the General in a confidential whisper.

Elinor did think so, although she did not express it.

They all adjourned to the library.

Fay had brought with her a large inlaid work-box, which Sister

Mary had locked and sealed. This was said to contain evidence of the child's birth and parentage, and had been, by Mr. Butterfield's advice, reserved for the present occasion. It was placed on the table.

'Our young friend's "effects," as Butterfield calls the box. You will open it, General?' said Sir Gilbert.

'I decline. The responsibility is yours,' said General Arlington, seating himself at a little distance from the table.

'Mine! My dear General, Butterfield and my daughter consider me irresponsible,' said Sir Gilbert helplessly. 'I always tremble when I break a seal, lest I should happen on a bill or mortgage. Can I be assured that this Chinese puzzle may not contain a parchment?'

He sat down and drew the box towards him. Elinor stood by his side, her hand on his shoulder: the others took seats near the table. He and the General faced each other.

'The "twa dogs," General, with our bone of contention between us,' said Sir Gilbert carelessly, his hand on the seal.

Elinor pressed his shoulder as if to urge him not to irritate his guest. He smiled and glanced up at her.

'I understand, *ma fille*. You are fortunate in bachelorhood, General. My children tyrannise over me sadly, and what with their rules, Butterfield's reproaches, and your ownership, I am little better than a white slave. I wish you would open this! Well! "needs must"—the proverb proceeds further than I can venture in this society.'

He broke the seal, turned the key, and raised the lid of the box. The General looked on, striving to seem unconcerned. His brow was knit, and his sharp black eyes darted fire at Sir Gilbert.

'You will at least examine the contents, General? I have broken the seal, and it was like breaking poor George's heart,' said Sir Gilbert, leaning back in his chair and taking up his eyeglass.

'I will have nothing to do with it!' cried the General, his anger rising.

'May I look through the box?' asked frightened Elinor.

The General waved assent, and she immediately uplifted the top compartment, and laid it on the table. Heads were protruded involuntarily as she proceeded to unfold the contents. These were chiefly implements of female handicraft, faded and rusted, but preserved apparently religiously. Amongst them were a gold thimble, marked with the word *souvenir*, and a curious silver bodkin-case. In one division were the withered leaves of a rose; in another some square yellow papers, tied with faded pink ribbon. Elinor hesitated to touch these, for the dead scent made her faint; and she knew not what the discoloured envelopes might contain. But a nod from the steward bade her unfasten the ribbon. A curl of soft black hair fell on the table. In the paper that had enshrined it were the words; '*Félicité Gabrielle, âgée de deux ans.*'

Her fingers trembled as she unfolded another paper, and saw a curl of brown hair, inscribed, '*Son père: mon bien-aimé.*'

'The little girl's hair! Poor George's hair!' murmured Sir Gilbert.

The General looked on, grim and silent.

When Elinor had carefully refolded and replaced these mementoes, she uplifted a lid, and saw beneath a number of small fragments of torn paper. Her father took them up, and saying they were merely scraps, with here and there a French word, put them back again.

Having examined the top division, Elinor proceeded to remove the contents of the bottom half, which were more important. There was a pocket-book, on the fly-leaf of which was written 'Georges de Saint Ange,' and which contained various entries, such as 'À Lyons. À Rochelle. Point d'argent. Perdu. Gagné. Félicité ill. Fée admired. Luck. From my amiable brother thirty pounds,' and the like. There was also a small volume of Béranger's poems, inscribed 'A F. G. de M.,' and a copy of verses in indifferent French, signed Georges, and headed 'A ma Félicité.' Beneath these articles were two cases with clasps, which Sir Gilbert and Elinor opened simultaneously, and exclaimed, the one, 'George!' the other, 'The child's mother!'

The cases contained coloured photographic miniatures of a young man and woman.

'There is no doubt about this,' said Sir Gilbert, quietly passing the case he held to General Arlington.

'And this is so like the child!' said Elinor, holding the other before her father, and struggling to repress tears.

But all eyes turned on General Arlington. He became deadly pale, and his hands trembled visibly. Dr. Hope, seeing this, glanced into the box, and remarked, in order to divert attention from his patron, that there were still other contents.

Elinor emptied the box of a curious medley of child treasures. These were the waxen legs and arms of a doll, several broken pipes, bits of old china, and a set of very common studs carefully wrapped in paper. Her tears fell into the box, and Dr. Hope glanced from her to the General, who still sat, rigidly examining the photograph, then crept quietly round the table, and looked over his shoulder, whispering,—

'Do not allow yourself to be excited.'

'Poor little heart!' said Sir Gilbert, taking up a few of the broken pipes. 'There is love somewhere beneath that wild manner. You must look for it, General. A child who could treasure these is not worthless, and may make your old age green.'

'She is nothing to me. I see no proofs,' said the General, holding his brother's likeness uneasily, yet looking pale and inflexible.

'Surely there can be no doubt of that picture!' said Sir Gilbert. 'Look at it, Butterfield.'

'It is certainly Mr. George Arlington,' said the steward. 'You must allow that, General.'

'It is the photograph of my brother; but that does not make the child his legitimate offspring,' responded the General, clenching his teeth and fist.

'Go and fetch her, Elinor. It is just possible she may know her own father, and settle the doubts of her most incredulous uncle,' said Sir Gilbert.

'I acknowledge no relationship, Miss Oreburn. You may tell her so,' said the General, as Elinor thankfully escaped.

She found Aimée and Fay in animated discussion, and heard the child say, as she entered her sister's room,—

'Angel! if I swear to be wise, wilt thou bear me in the clouds to my father, as when I saw thee in the Louvre?'

'Why did you tell her I was an angel?' asked Aimée of Elinor, in English. 'She has already disarranged her hair, and I cannot quiet her.'

When the child saw Elinor, she began to shriek and cling to Aimée.

'Thou hast promised to be wise,' suggested perplexed Aimée, in French.

'If thou wilt put on thy wings and take me to my father, I am wise,' was the reply.

'We promise everything, if you will come quietly with me to your uncle,' chimed in Elinor.

Fay glanced at her with her great, luminous eyes, stood with her finger on her lip, then stamped her foot and shouted,—

'I hate him! Angel, I have been wise long, I am naughty again.'

'Still thou hast promised me to be good, and to comport thyself as a lady before the company,' urged Aimée.

'*Hein!*' cried Fay, and, bursting into uncontrollable laughter, began to point her toes and hold up her frock, with a 'So, Mademoiselle?'

'Yes, that will do,' replied Aimée. 'You will accompany my sister.'

With a marvellous grimace, the child danced towards Elinor, and finally danced down-stairs. When they reached the library door, however, she drew back, with a 'Fay! thou art sure to be wicked. Must I enter, Mademoiselle?'

'I think so,' replied Elinor, and took her in with some resistance.

She lagged behind until she drew near the table. A glance showed that it was strewn with her possessions, and, making for one of the photographs, she seized it, exclaiming,—

'*Mon père! mon père!*' Having kissed it, she hugged it to her breast, and, looking round defiantly, assured the spectators that it was hers, and they should not have it. Then, covering it with her skirt, she fixed her eyes suddenly on the General, and, pointing at him, cried,—

'Is that he? *le petit diable!* I hate him!'

He returned her fierce gaze with one as fierce, and Sir Gilbert rose, with an involuntary smile, and intercepted the glances. Taking her hand, he led her to a sofa, and placed her between himself and Elinor.

She hid her head a moment behind Elinor's back, then popped it out, and shook her little fist at the General.

'If thou wilt only be quiet! If thou wilt answer the questions with truth!' whispered Elinor.

'I never lie, Mademoiselle. My father always believed me,' she returned, now turning upon Elinor.

'So will we, my child, if thou wilt be quiet,' said Sir Gilbert; then, addressing the General, added, 'Will you question her?'

'I do not speak French. Dr. Hope does, and will do so for me,' replied the ferocious veteran.

Meanwhile, the child had turned to her photograph, and was talking to it.

'I see thee again, beloved! I am happy! I was in despair while thou wast imprisoned in that box. Thou wilt tell me what to say, is it not? We hate those men—you and I—but we have promised to be wise and answer them.'

'Listen to that gentleman,' whispered Elinor, glancing at Dr. Hope, who was attempting to speak, but who found that his French was rusty.

'Who is he? I like him not,' returned the child.

All eyes were on her and Elinor—the one dark and defiant, the other fair and timid.

'Begin, Septimus. You mumble like a schoolboy!' said the General.

The doctor made a plunge at last, in very uncertain French.

'Whose photograph have you in your arms, little girl?'

Fay replied by a stare.

'Answer that gentleman,' said Sir Gilbert.

'What does he say? I understand not his language,' retorted Fay, making a face at Dr. Hope.

'He asks whose likeness this is,' replied Sir Gilbert, touching the photograph.

'It is my father, and he shall not have it!' she cried, covering up the case with her black frock.

'What was his name?' continued Dr. Hope, more fluently.

'Monsieur de Saint Ange,' she replied.

'Where did he live?' pursued the doctor, stumbling over a needless word or so.

'What does he mean?' she inquired of Elinor, who explained.

'Nowhere. We were gipsies,' she answered.

'But thou must have dwelt somewhere,' interposed Sir Gilbert.

'Yes,—in cafés, restaurants, hotels, salons, auberges, fifth flats, sixth flats, in the country, on the sea, *à la belle étoile*, at Paris, Boulogne, Hamburg, Pau—I forget. Everywhere. *Pauvre père!*'

She hugged and kissed her photograph.

'Who is this?' asked Dr. Hope, taking up the other case.

'*Madame ma mère.*'

'Do you remember her?'

'What does the fool say?' she inquired of Elinor, for the doctor stumbled over an aggressive reflective verb.

'Is it that thou recallest thy mother?' translated Elinor.

The child shook her head.

'Perhaps Miss Oreburn will kindly put the questions,' suggested the General, whose face was thunder.

'I hate that man! I will not answer him,' retorted Fay.

'It is thy father's brother. Thou hast promised to be wise, whispered Elinor.

'Not for so long. Make haste, or I am wicked immediately.'

General Arlington suggested a few questions, which Elinor translated; whilst the discomfited doctor paused with a bland smile.

'What was thy mother's name?'

'Félicité.'

'Her other name?'

'Gabrielle—also my names; but they called me Fay.'

'I mean her surname.'

'Saint Ange. Was not that the name of my father?'

'But thy mother's name before she was married. Recall it if thou canst.'

'I have never heard it. Was it not Saint Ange?'

'Who told thee this was thy mother?'

'I have always known it. Marie, and Madame Le Mans, and Petiton said always, "Look at Madame thy mother, wicked one, and see how good and handsome she is. Better and handsomer than thou." They fatigued me with Madame my mother.'

'But did thy father tell thee nothing of her?'

'Once he showed her to me and wept. Never again. *Pauvre père!*'

Once more she kissed the photograph.

'Hast thou any relations?'

'*Hein!* Relations! No, no, only my father.'

She screamed and looked at the General, who maintained a rigid indifference.

'Hast thou any friends?'

'I have my father.'

'Didst thou always live with him?'

'All the day and all the night, till they took him from me—*chéri!*'

She kissed the photograph.

'Didst thou ever see thy mother's relations?'

She answered by a surprised stare.

'Did they ever tell thee she was dead?'

'No; but they asked me often, "Where is Madame thy mother?"'

A look of intelligence passed between the General and doctor, and Mr. Butterfield put the next question.

'Did her father ever tell her that her mother was dead?'

'He wept when I asked him of Madame my mother, so I spoke no more of her.'

'Question her about her father's death and antecedents,' said Mr. Butterfield.

'I cannot,' replied Elinor; and Sir Gilbert took up the *rôle*.

'Where did they take thy father from thee, my little one?'

'At Dinan. He was ill long. We had no money, and we could not go to the salons to make it. Monsieur his brother would not send it, and we should have had no food but for the good Madame Bonivet. Sister Marie came and helped us. I loved her then, but she brought me here, and I love her no more. Yes, I know where they hid my father from me. And they would not let me go with him. Angel Aimée will bear me to him, now that I have answered those hideous men. I have been wise. I am naughty again. *Mon père*, thou didst love me if I was wise or wicked. Nobody loves me now!'

She ceased, laid her head on Elinor's shoulder, and sobbed. General Arlington's face softened. Sir Gilbert saw it, rose, took Fay's hand and tried to lead her to him.

'Be wise yet a moment, and thou shalt return to Aimée. Everyone loves thee,' he said.

'*Hein!* you mistake, Monsieur,' she said; 'but I go. That box was Madame my mother's; it is mine. Those pipes were my father's; they also are mine. And behold the remains of my poor Beatrice! Who has dared to disarrange them?'

Her eyes flashed through their tears as she went to the table, and was about to take possession of her treasures.

'Thou shalt have them when thou hast spoken to thine uncle,' said Sir Gilbert.

'Be kind to her, dear General Arlington,' said Elinor, emotion overcoming dislike.

The General flushed at the request, and seemed inclined to obey. But no sooner was Fay face to face with her uncle than she stamped her foot, clenched her fist, and cried,—

'I hate you! Cruel! You made my father to die.'

The General looked at her a moment, turned pale, and, waving his hand, said,—

'Remove her—remove her! What a child—what a child!'

Sir Gilbert, who had witnessed her combative propensities, drew her forcibly back; but she had not finished. She got loose, and again faced her uncle. Her manner changed suddenly, and, with French grace, she made him a profound curtsey.

'You are old and ugly, Monsieur,' she said, 'and we hate you—my father and I. We will not live with you. We desire not your money; we have said a thousand times that we prefer our liberty. *Adieu. Bien des remercîments.*'

Even while she was uttering the concluding words, and while the General was waving her away, she was eyeing him suspiciously. She made a sudden dart at his head, and, with the tact of a malicious monkey, seized what, alas! was not his hair, but his *toupet*. Before she could receive the blow that he levelled at her, she had held it aloft with a laugh that rang through the air, disclosing the bald patch beneath, had dropped it, and disappeared, amid the suppressed laughter of the company, and the General's suppressed malediction.

CHAPTER X.

GET RID OF HER.

AN old beau or belle will forgive anything more readily than the revelation of a false pretension to youth. Show up a set of teeth, rouge, hair-dye, pearl-powder, padding, a wig or a *toupet*, and you sin past pardon. Every one felt that Fay's doom was sealed when she revealed the General's well-concealed baldness. He might have condoned her bad language,—which he certainly did not comprehend,—but not this novel offence. He was fortunately amongst gentlefolk when the aggravating discovery was made, so that no further notice was taken of it. Nevertheless, he rose in his anger, and imitated the child by stamping his foot and shaking his fist towards the door.

Meanwhile Dr. Hope picked up the false locks unperceived, and laid his calming hand on the General's arm. It was of no use. He turned on him fiercely, and bade him order the carriage.

'If it had not been for you, I shouldn't have been exposed to such an insulting virago,' he added. 'And if it hadn't been for you, Sir Gilbert, the impostor would never have appeared.'

'My usual ill-luck, General. But now, what shall we do with her?' said Sir Gilbert. 'I confess that I do not wear the honour of her presence lightly; and you do not seem to affect it. Still you must acknowledge that she is your niece.'

'I acknowledge nothing, sir. I say there isn't a drop of English blood in her veins!' cried the General, turning angrily on Sir Gilbert.

'Albeit she is George's daughter. What unnatural veins!' rejoined that irritating baronet.

Elinor got up from her sofa and came towards them.

'Perhaps it might be well if you would think over this matter, General Arlington. The little girl is so untutored that it is difficult to decide for the best. She might remain here a day or two, and my sister's influence might improve her.'

'And you could write to Sir Gilbert,' suggested Dr. Hope.

'And we could come to some agreement'—Mr. Butterfield.

The General glanced fiercely from one to the other, and his eyes finally rested on Elinor. He spoke more quietly.

'You are the only one with a shadow of sense, Miss Oreburn. If your father were like you, we might be friends, you know. But you must see how annoying it is to have this gipsy brat brought to one, in whom I don't believe and won't believe, you know. If Sir Gilbert chooses to burden himself with her, I cannot be expected to lighten his load in a minute, you know.'

'A little consideration will probably set all right between you. We can keep the child until you have made up your mind. Can we not, father?' said Elinor, looking appealingly at Sir Gilbert, who was whistling languidly.

'*Cela dépend.* How long does it take you to make up your mind, General? I have never succeeded in making up mine. It is like a loose mattress that will not get into shape, and on which one lies uneasily until some one else arranges it. You decline to embarrass yourself with your niece to-day. I am not surprised. She is slightly restive, and needs breaking in. Shall we say to-morrow—or—the next day?'

'I will write, Sir Gilbert. I repeat that it is one thing to receive her into *your* house, and another to thrust her into mine.'

'Ah, I understand! You like to earn your honours, and not to have them thrust upon you. Admirable ambition! So different from mine. They must come to me of their own accord, or not at all.'

'I want no honours. I am already a general officer and a K.C.B. As Miss Oreburn judiciously proposes that the—the—that girl shall stop here for the present, I will think it over and write. Though she is no more George's daughter than you are.'

Without waiting for further comment, the General hurried into the hall, seized his hat, and put it on. Feeling more at ease now that the bald patch was covered, he turned to make his adieux. But his returning equanimity was again disturbed. Simultaneously the bells of the east wing began to peal gently, and there was a shriek on the landing. Fay, having escaped from Aimée, was seized upon with no gentle grasp by Arbiter, and the noise was caused by a second shaking. Dr. Hope suddenly ran up the great staircase. He found Fay and Arbiter near Aimée's door, struggling.

'If you do not keep that child from Miss Aimée, and stop those bells, she will be worse than ever,' he said.

'You may be sure I will do my best, sir,' replied Arbiter.

Dr. Hope went into Aimée's room, and, finding that she was too much interested in Fay either to faint or hear the bells, left it again immediately.

'*V'là*!' cried Fay, giving the doctor a lusty kick as he passed.

She had already made three enemies.

He found General Arlington in his carriage, awaiting him, and prepared with reproaches at his delay. He urged that it had been caused by his anxiety to prevent another encounter with the child.

'Child! Demon!' shouted the General.

'Hush! Not another word. I foresee an attack,' remarked the doctor, his hand on the patient's pulse. 'One, two, three, feverish rapidity; you must have a draught.'

He dived into one of the carriage-pockets, and drew out a bottle and wine-glass. Personal fear overmastered rage, and the General swallowed a potion, leaned back in his carriage, and held his tongue. They reached the Manor in silence.

'Half an hour's nap before dinner, and you will be all right,' ordered the doctor, and the General obeyed.

He went to his luxurious bedroom, and placed himself cautiously in an easy-chair. His usually brisk movements were always slackened by dread of an attack. Here, flattered by the reflection of his person in a cheval glass, he dosed into forgetfulness. He dreamed a dream delightful to his vanity. He was actually married to Miss Oreburn, who headed with aristocratic grace his table. But she suddenly vanished, and was replaced by Fay. A succession of Fays, with bells in their hands, followed one another, and were, in turn, replaced by Sir Gilbert. Then the Fays and the bells returned, and danced round him, rang into his ears, and disported themselves in diabolic fashion.

Aroused by the dinner-bell, he saw them in the cheval glass, and would probably have smashed that defenceless mirror, had his valet not appeared. Had Sir Gilbert been at hand, he could now have discovered the number and quality of his teeth; for he performed a most scrupulous toilet, and was surmounted by a new *toupet*.

Dr. Hope remained to dinner, served punctually at seven-thirty. A delay of five minutes in that sumptuous and solemn meal would have lost his cook her place. A pantomime was enacted during the supreme hour, which must have indemnified the powdered domestics for much serving and many reproaches. A smile or disapproving nod from the doctor decided the General's food; and master and man watched anxiously to see whether a desired dainty was considered digestible or not.

No sooner had the servants disappeared than the General began the subject of Fay.

'What is your real opinion, Septimus?' he asked.

'She is apparently your brother's daughter,' replied Dr. Hope cautiously.

'I will not acknowledge her!' cried the General, giving the table a blow with his fist.

'You need not; but publicity would induce scandal, and the world would acknowledge her. Understand, my dear sir, that I do not believe Mr. George Arlington was ever married,'—Dr. Hope emphasized this,—'and until a proof of marriage is found, you cannot be expected to receive her.'

'Just so, Septimus. I never will receive her. What do you advise?'

'Caution. Propose to provide for her elsewhere, until you have made inquiries abroad concerning the marriage, and exact secrecy of Sir Gilbert and his family.'

'That confounded prig will never be secret. I will ruin him!'

'That would bring the child and her history before the world, and your brother's forgotten forgeries would be again discussed; so would his marriage; so would your conduct, however stainless, with regard to him and the child; so would'—

'For Heaven's sake, stop! I could not bear it. What shall I do?'

'Propose to send her to school abroad, while you prosecute inquiries that can never be answered.'

'I should have to pay for her. I cannot afford it. Let her return to that interfering Sister and her orphanage.'

'Not a bad idea. You can name this to Sir Gilbert; but do not irritate him into blazoning forth the child's story.'

'Child! by Jove, Septimus, she is a Gorgon. Her eyes and voice nearly brought on an attack. Had it not been for Miss Oreburn, I should have boxed her ears.'

'She looked as if she would box yours, General. However, she must be got rid of. You promised to write. Much may be said in a discreet letter. You need neither compromise yourself, nor offend Sir Gilbert.'

'I don't care a straw whether I offend him or not; but his daughter is an elegant girl, and a wonderful manager. So young, and capable of superintending a household intuitively.'

'Just so. I should continue on friendly terms for the present. The sooner the letter is off your mind the better.'

'I will write it, and you shall advise. Had George married, we must have heard of it. Let us write the letter.'

The letter was written accordingly, and despatched early the next morning, by a special messenger, to the Court.

It found Sir Gilbert, Elinor, and Fay at breakfast.

'From the *antico adorato*, Elinor—from the amiable uncle, Mademoiselle,' observed Sir Gilbert, as he took it from a salver held daintily by Tommy. 'Tell the man to wait till we have finished breakfast, and fetch Mr. Butterfield, most accomplished of Baronets.'

When Tommy disappeared, Sir Gilbert said that he would not open it until the steward arrived, as he was incompetent to deal with the General since the episode of the *toupet.* Fay caught the last word, and fixed her great eyes upon him. She had been coaxed into comparative quiet by Aimée, and now sat with her father's photograph on one side of her plate, and the fragments of her doll on the other.

'Do me the favour to use a *serviette*, Mademoiselle,' said Sir Gilbert, returning her gaze, and glancing at her fingers, which were covered with her favourite omelette.

'*Ma foi*, Monsieur, it ennuies me to wipe my fingers. I am not a lady, like Mademoiselle. We eat at our ease—is it not, *chéri?*' she replied, taking up her photograph, smearing, and then wiping it tenderly.

Sir Gilbert shrugged his shoulders.

'Thou must be more elegant when thou art at the Manor, Mademoiselle.'

'Me? I am ever *gauche*, Monsieur. They scold and regard me, and I mock at them,—ha, ha!—as I mock at the little viper yesterday, and carry off his hair. Ha, ha!'

She burst into ringing laughter, in which her companions joined involuntarily. The encouragement was sufficient. In a moment she had pushed back her chair, crossed her legs, and set her face in imitation of General Arlington. It was perfect.

'He looks at me so, and I do so!' she cried, seizing her own lengthy locks, with a renewed shout of laughter.

She was interrupted by the entrance of the steward.

'*Voici le vieux bon homme!*' she continued, and resumed her seat at the table with a grimace.

'Most welcome of men!' exclaimed Sir Gilbert, taking up the General's letter. 'Break that delicate seal and open the perfumed envelope intended for my daughter; I could not taint the virgin page with the *soupçon* of onion conveyed to my fingers from the cuisine of our inimitable *chef.*'

'It is from General Arlington,' put in Elinor, seeing Mr. Butterfield's puzzled face.

He took the letter, and, at Sir Gilbert's request, read it—first to himself, then aloud. It was as follows:—

'DEAR SIR GILBERT,—After some hours of deliberation, I have made up my mind concerning the child you have so unfortunately burdened yourself with. I will cause inquiries to be set on foot in France, through Messrs. Aigret, my Paris agents, as to whether my brother George was ever married,—which I much doubt,—and whether he had a child. I will request them to instigate a search for a certificate of the said marriage—if there was one; and of the

birth and baptism of his child--if he had one. Pending these negotiations, I beg to suggest that the girl be placed in the care of the Sister who voluntarily undertook the charge of her. I will pay for her board. Failing this, I would defray her expenses back to France, where my agents would place her in a convent or school, until her birth and antecedents be made clear. When the facts are ascertained we will discuss the matter further; meanwhile I would ask for strict secrecy, both on your account and my own, as well as on that of her in whom you are so strangely interested. Publicity would anger me, and ruin her. I regret that you should be thus troubled, but you will allow that it is no fault of mine. With kind compliments to Miss Oreburn,
Yours faithfully,

AUSTIN ARLINGTON.'

'That is Septimus Hope. He should have been a lawyer,' said Mr. Butterfield, as he concluded.

'Cruel!' ejaculated Elinor, glancing at Fay, whose large eyes were fixed on Mr. Butterfield's face as he read.

She had forgotten her breakfast, and sat with her elbows on the table, her chin in her hand.

'The man waits; I will answer it at once,' said Sir Gilbert, rising.

'Dear father, do not be hasty. Hear what Mr. Butterfield says,' cried Elinor.

'I will be prudent and cool as the General, you shall be convinced of it,' said Sir Gilbert, leaving the room, the letter crumpled up in his hand.

He was not absent five minutes. He returned with a sheet of paper, and planted himself behind Fay's chair.

'Listen, most devoted of allies,' he said, reading his letter aloud.

"DEAR GENERAL,—I promised your dead brother to give his child into your care, and his letter has refreshed my somewhat dried-up memory. In spite of my misfortunes, I trust I am still 'an honourable man,' and therefore hold a promise sacred. Accordingly, till such time as the inquiries you make shall be answered, and certificates found, I keep the child here. Having burdened myself, I must bear the burden until you take it off my shoulders.

"Yours truly,
"GILBERT OREBURN."'

While Sir Gilbert was reading this letter, he stroked Fay's head with his left hand; and when he finished he stooped and kissed her brow. She suddenly seized his hand, and pressed it to her lips and flushed cheek.

'I am afraid he will take offence at that letter,' suggested the steward.

'If you would reflect a little, dear father. Say you will send an answer by post,' pleaded Elinor.

'After "due deliberation," like the old heathen himself? Nay, *ma fille;* there are impulses neither to be reflected nor refracted—this is one.'

'Of course you could not forsake the child, father, but'—

'Spoken like mine own Elinor. What dost thou say, *ma petite?*'

At this question, in French, Fay turned, knelt on her chair, and faced Sir Gilbert. 'What does Monsieur ask?' she said.

'Wilt thou go to Sister Mary, or wait for the decision of thine uncle the General?' inquired Sir Gilbert.

'I will never see either of them more,' replied Fay passionately.

'Then what wilt thou do?

'I will go to my father in heaven.'

She hid her face in her hands, leaned on the chair-back, and sobbed.

'That is settled, *Dieu merci!*' said Sir Gilbert.

'He is glad; he likes me to go to thee, *mon père.* He says *Dieu merci!*' shrieked Fay, jumping from her chair, and running to the door.

'Where art thou going?' asked Elinor.

'To Angel Aimée, but I take with me my father and my Beatrice,' she replied, returning for her treasures.

She escaped to Aimée, who was in bed, prostrated by the excitement of the previous day. She jumped upon the bed, and threw her arms round her, entreating her to put on her wings and bear her to her father.

'I cannot, darling. God alone can reunite you. Be patient, and you will meet again.'

'I will not be patient—I will kill myself! I will not go to my bad uncle—I will not go to the Sister!'

She again jumped off the bed and ran out of the room. Aimée heard little feet patter down the corridor, and the cry of '*Mon père!*' resound. She rang and entreated Arbiter to go after her, which she did; but Fay was nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE EAST WING.

'YOU must forgive my persistency, Sir Gilbert,' said Mr. Butterfield, after Fay had left the dining-room, 'but General Arlington has you completely in his power, and if you irritate him, he may foreclose.'

'And then, Butterfield?'

'Then he will soon have the Court and everything else.'

'What a weight removed from a tottering bench! I shall be on my legs a little longer. What says Elinor?'

'That you must try to keep on terms with the General, dear father.'

'By getting rid of his orphan niece? Scarcely, *ma fille.* I must leave it in your hands, who have captivated the old beau. I feel that you will protect me, with your combination of elegance and economy.'

'Dear father, this child is a fearful responsibility, and her uncle is her proper guardian.'

So thought Mr. Butterfield, and he tried to argue the point with Sir Gilbert. They remained in discourse while Aimée was arguing with Arbiter up-stairs, and were at last interrupted by a message from her. She wished to see Fay. As the child was not in the dining-room, they sought her elsewhere. She had disappeared; she was doubtless in hiding somewhere. All joined in search of her. They had no doubt of finding her—but where? The Court was so large that she might be undiscovered for hours. The inhabited rooms were searched; passages, closets, chests, nooks, and crannies were invaded; she was not found. The Court resounded to calls of 'Mademoiselle!—Miss Fay!—*Ma petite!—Mon enfant!*' No childish voice replied. Hours passed, and even Arbiter became anxious.

'Can she have got into the east wing?' said Elinor.

'Impossible! It is hermetically sealed,' replied Sir Gilbert.

Mr. Butterfield seized this opportunity. He was so anxious to have this part of the Court opened again, that he suggested the possibility of her having penetrated into it by some back passage.

'Then we will face my grandfather,' said Sir Gilbert. 'The occasion makes the thief, and this occasion must rouse the ghost.'

On the spur of the moment, Sir Gilbert forced open the rusty hinges of a spring-door which no child could have unclosed, and entered the dreaded east wing. Mr. Butterfield hurried down the long passage, and unbarred the shutters of the big window at the bottom, letting a flood of light in upon the dust and darkness of years. Of course Fay was not there; but the steward had gained his point, and he went leisurely from door to door, unfastening such as would yield to his hand; while Sir Gilbert called loudly and pathetically upon the lost child. Mr. Butterfield asked and obtained permission to complete his work both above and below stairs on the morrow, muttering,—

'Whether she be lost or found, we shall have no more bell-ringing.'

Dr. Hope arrived while Sir Gilbert was thus engaged. Arbiter took him to Aimée, who had risen, and was in mortal terror for the child. She had already perfect faith in her doctor, and told him a once of their anxiety.

'*You* must, at least, be quiet,' he said. 'Nothing more unfortunate could have happened for all parties than the advent of the little fury.'

'Oh, Dr. Hope, pray do not say so! We are miserable about her,' said Aimée. 'She is a foreigner, and speaks a strange language.'

'She is Bohemian, and understands her *métier*,' said the doctor. 'The General is furious, and I know not what to say to him.'

'Tell him that his little niece has fled from fear of her unknown future,' suggested Aimée. 'That will rouse his pity.'

'We must not use the word niece, Miss Aimée, if we desire to pacify him. But here is Sir Gilbert.'

'You have not found her?' gasped Aimée.

'No,' replied Sir Gilbert, scarcely noticing Dr. Hope, who, however, addressed him.

'I am come as ambassador, Sir Gilbert. General Arlington bids me say'—

'Tell him there is no time for diplomacy,' interrupted Sir Gilbert. 'The embassy has broken down. His niece, terrified by us English brigands, has disappeared, and I cannot let her be drowned in the lake or lost in the woods while we settle her guardianship. Good morning.'

He left the room, and was succeeded by Elinor, who had been scouring the plantations and shrubberies. She looked almost as pale and terrified as Aimée. But Dr. Hope seized the opportunity for his own purposes. He said that he had no doubt the child would turn up, but that she had been the means of greatly aggravating General Arlington's disease, and irritating his temper. He entreated Elinor to persuade Sir Gilbert to conceal her parentage until, at least, inquiries had been made. He said that Sir Gilbert's letter had caused the General to declare that he would at once proceed to extremities with him if he persisted in keeping the girl in the country. He so far worked on the sisters as to make them promise to use their influence with their father to let Fay go to school, and to conceal her real name until the General chose to disclose it.

'Everything depends upon it,' concluded the doctor. 'For General Arlington is resolute when once roused. It would be a pity indeed to disturb recently-formed relations by keeping a child in whom no one is interested.'

'You mistake. We are all interested in her,' said Aimée.

'Of course, in a Christian sort of way—so am I,' said Dr. Hope, with a half sneer. 'But I scarcely think we need be Sir Gilbert's ruin by fostering romantic fancies concerning a child of whom we know nothing.'

'Sir Gilbert will be the best judge of his own conduct,' said Elinor haughtily, roused by his manner. 'But we lose time in useless reflections while the poor child is not found.'

Dr. Hope took his leave, and went straight to the Manor to communicate Fay's disappearance to the General. That affectionate relative rejoiced, and said he hoped she might never reappear. Dr. Hope informed him that Sir Gilbert was too much occupied with his search to think of other matters, but that the young ladies were quite alive to the propriety of concealing her name, and sending her from the Court.

'Miss Oreburn is the only member of that family, you know, who has ever had common sense,' said the General. 'She would grace a coronet. As to Sir Gilbert, he is the most aggravating and conceited puppy ever born! I will be revenged on him yet. But his daughter must be conciliated, you know. You understand, don't you?'

Dr. Hope understood, but did not approve. He wanted no one but himself to reign in General Arlington's shallow affections. However, he lauded Elinor, and in so doing saw that he pleased his patron, who was fast falling in love with the elegant girl whose somewhat haughty reserve displeased him. But the General soon returned to the subject next his heart, which at that moment was Fay. He spoke of little else during the remainder of the day, and when Dr. Hope took his leave his last words were—

'I swear I will never acknowledge the beggar's brat!'

There seemed small probability of his being again asked to do so, for she could nowhere be found. While the General and his household slept the sleep of the prosperous, Sir Gilbert and his establishment were abroad, making the woods resound with their calls, and kindling up their paths with the dim, flickering light of lanterns.

CHAPTER XII.

LOST IN THE WOOD.

WHILE the Court was thus astir, Fay was bewildered and alone. With a child's unfathomable dread of the unknown, and with a half-consciousness of what had been said to her, she was terrified for her future. What can an untrained creature of impulse do but flee from what it fears? The instinct of the animal suggests flight from harm, and that of a frightened, passionate child, concealment. Fay ran away partly to hide from her uncle, and partly with a vague hope of returning to France and finding her father. Poor child! what did she know of the new world into which she was cast? She cared for no one but her dead father. If her crushed love had revived towards Aimée, fear had stamped it down again. So, as soon as she left her, she ran for her treasures, and, enveloping them in her frock, took flight. With the photograph of her father, her doll's remains, and the broken pipes, she descended the wide staircase, crossed the great hall, and, glancing furtively about her, left the house.

Once outside, she ran round the east wing into the shubberies, and was soon lost in a maze of overgrown laurels and yew-hedges. Speeding along the paths they enclosed, quickening and ever quickening her steps, she at last reached a gate leading into the woods. She dashed through it, and continued her breathless course, until a fallen branch obstructed it, and she paused to look round.

The scene was so peaceful that she was reassured. She believed that no one could find her amongst the great, thick, interlacing trees. She sat down on the prostrate branch and began to count her pipes. She had dropped one, and tears filled her eyes; but, opening her photograph, she kissed it, and assured it that it was not her fault. Something in the mute picture comforted her, and she smiled. The song of a blackbird attracted her, and with the happy versatility of childhood she glanced from her portrait to the tree above her head. The full-throated warbler seemed to be singing for her, and, after listening a moment, she joined in the lay, imitating his notes with a shrill, clear voice. The bird was frightened and flew away.

'He will not stay with me, but I have still thee, my father,' she murmured, kissing the photograph.

She again turned up her black skirt, and, gathering it up into her hand, enveloped her relics. She had not tarried to put on either hat or cloak, so she had no covering for neck or head, save her long black hair, which, as she set out again, was caught in the branches over which she scrambled. She uttered some passionate exclamations in French, scarcely translatable, as she scratched her hand in disengaging it. At the sight of a drop of blood, she looked terrified upwards, and screamed frequently for her father.

Having surmounted the fallen timber, she found herself in a green bridle-path, which delighted her much. She soon forgot all but her immediate surroundings, and it was pretty to see her little figure now wandering on, now pausing at its instinctive pleasure. She began to play with the lights and shadows as they glinted athwart the huge trunks of the trees and fell lightly on the sward. She looked like some elf dropped alone into the wood, as, guarding her hoard with one arm, and extending and waving the other, she danced fantastically over the sun's checker-work; first pointing one toe on the path of a sunbeam, then the other on the dark green interval of a tree-shadow; now vainly striving to trace the lines, intricate as the branches above them, anon treading daintily on the golden network between.

But the day wore on, and hunger came. Fay sat down amongst the greening fern, and turned out her little pocket. In the bottom were the stale remains of buns and biscuits, half an apple, and several pieces of chocolate. She ate them greedily, and was looking about for water, when she fancied she heard a distant shout. Again she scudded onwards, this time heedless of the path, and attracted by a nook of bluebells. She was soon lost in a bed of 'living sapphire and gleaming emerald. The roots of the trees were hidden in flowers and mosses, and the towering fern concealed her. She remained here long, gathering flowers and imitating birds. She was hours before she became conscious of weariness, or aware that she was growing cold. But a sense of pain and loneliness came at last. The sun was hidden by clouds, the flowers darkened, the checker-work faded away. She looked about for the broad path ; she could not find it. She was lost in the wood.

She wandered hither and thither, torn by briers, and hurt by tree-roots, startled by the wild things she startled first herself, and diving deeper and deeper into her leafy hiding-place. At last the terror of her situation was so great that she turned and tried to retrace her steps. But her light feet had made no impression on the moss and flowers, and she had left no memorial with the cruel thorns that had done their best to retard her flight. Her cries for her father became very piteous, although she showed a brave spirit in guarding his picture, and striving to overmaster the thickening obstacles in her way. There was a sound of trickling water somewhere, and she stopped to listen. She was thirsty, and the refreshing murmur and drip, drip of the distant brook quickened her dying energy. She tried to force her way through the underwood in the direction of the sound, and, after surmounting many difficulties, reached an immense oak, at the foot of which was a dropping well, nearly hidden by masses of towering fern and clumps of rich moss. But the water made its way through these into the tiniest of streams, which trickled and lost itself like poor Fay amongst the brushwood. Truly it was a fairy well and fairy brooklet, and it tenderly yielded to its namesake the refreshment of its hidden store. The child stooped over the well and drank, pushing aside the obstructing fern with her disengaged hand. Drops like big tears fell on the head of the poor orphan from the soft-hearted mosses above, and when she had slaked her thirst, she glanced up at these liquid beads and smiled. She had never seen anything so beautiful as that sweet spot, and her eyes were naturally alive to beauty. She muttered the word 'Aimée,' as if it recalled the human loveliness she had voluntarily quitted.

Round the well and huge oak was a patch of sward, so bright and green that Puck and all the fairies might have rejoiced to dance upon it. The evil-natured briers had not dared to overgrow it, so Fay sat down on it, and tried to think. Thought was not yet the normal state of her young mind. It was full of fancies, fears, loves, and hates, but scarcely of thoughts; so, trying to induce these novel spirits within its doors, she herself suddenly shut them out by falling asleep. Dreams willingly took the place of the unwilling thoughts, and Fay was happy again. She looked almost like a weird thing, as she lay in her torn black frock upon the gleaming mosses. Her right hand went naturally up to the pale cheek, her left still grasped the crumpled skirt. Her little legs, covered with scratches, were drawn up as if for warmth, and her bare neck gleamed in the fading sunlight. The long black fringes of her eyes were moist with tears, and the well-drops still shone on her raven hair.

Childhood's sleep is heavy, and Fay slumbered on as peacefully on her mossy bed as if she had been on down. While Sir Gilbert and his people were searching for her far and near, she lay beside the fairy well, beneath the big oak that he had loved when a boy. There was a large wild cherry-tree close by, covered with a sheet of white blossom, and the hawthorn was beginning to bud. The spring evening was golden though chill, and the sunbeams penetrated to where the child slept. But around and beyond darkness was gathering amidst the woods, and the songs of the birds began to mellow into lullabies. The coo of the wood-pigeon grew fainter and fainter, while slowly, slowly, a dreamy silence replaced the melodious sound of nature. If Fay were to breathe out her young life in that lonely sleep, the robins could not cover her with leaves, as they did the 'Children in the Wood;' for every leaf grew strong on its branch, and the destroying angel of death had not, as yet, passed over them. Twilight fell on budding life, and Fay was the only young thing in those far-stretching glades which had, as yet, known sickness or sorrow.

It is mournful to watch the fading of light, and to listen to the dying of sound. We do this while we pause to let the child sleep. The sunbeams slowly withdraw, the birds twitter dreamily to their nestlings, the hares retire to their forms, the grasshopper chirps himself to sleep. One star comes out in the grey-blue arch above, one glow-worm gleams on the grey-green moss below, and still it is not night; but a soft, harmonious blending of night and day.

Yet the child's sleep is sad,—the silence is sad; but, oh, not half so sad as the lonely sleep of thousands of young immortals in the desolate night of crowded cities, and the silence that falls on their hard, unbefriended bed! But God and the stars watch on.

CHAPTER XIII.

CARRIED AWAY.

THE silence that long brooded over the sleeping child was at last broken. A distant whistle and the bark of a dog penetrated it. These were followed by the dog, which burst upon the sward near Fay, and, perceiving her, barked again long and loud. He sniffed at her, walked round her, and disappeared. Then he came back, followed by a man. The twilight had nearly deepened into night, and nothing but the face and arm of the child were visible.

'What game have you found, Win? Not a hare, I hope, or Sir Gilbert will prosecute us as poachers,' said a voice, and a tall figure strode over the briers.

> '"Lo! a maiden sleeping sound
> On the dank and dirty ground,"'

was added, as the speaker stooped over Fay.

He paused to look at her, wondering if she was alive or dead. Then he touched and tried to awaken her, but did not succeed. The chill had stiffened her limbs and crept round her heart. He took off his coat, and, wrapping it round her, elicited the oft-repeated cry of '*Mon père!*' The dog licked her face and hands, while his master raised her gently, saying, 'At any rate she is alive.'

She partly awoke, and wailed something in French. He helped her to her feet, and told her kindly to come with him. Opening her large eyes dreamily, and stretching out one benumbed arm, she screamed in reply, and the woods re-echoed.

'Queer game, Win!' exclaimed the stranger, taking her outstretched hand, and trying to lead her away.

She resisted, and her foot caught in a tree-root. A sharp cry of pain succeeded, together with the words, '*Mon pied! Arrêtez!*'

He took her up in his arms, and began to make his way through the brushwood; but he was arrested by a shriek so piercing that he muttered, 'This is worse than a chorus of screech-owls.' Her foot had again caught in some obstacle, and it was apparent that she had sprained it. But the pain had not occasioned the cry. She had dropped her photograph-case, and was struggling to recover it. Nevertheless, the sudden agony caused faintness, and her head drooped on the stranger's shoulder, while the beloved picture was left where it fell.

'She is quiet, thank Heaven!' he said, and reached a path along which he walked rapidly, unconscious that she was insensible.

He stumbled on in the darkness, followed by his dog. He was soon out of the wood, and in the high road. Reaching a lodge with large gates, the dog barked an 'open sesame,' and a woman appeared, who undid the gates with a 'Good-night, Mr. William.' He returned a hasty 'Good-night,' and pursued his way up a broad drive, until he reached a house on an eminence, in the windows of which were plenty of lights. This was Castle House, the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny. He rang the bell furiously, and, when it was answered, said, 'Send my aunt, or—or—my sister.'

He carried Fay into a comfortable room with a large fire, and laid her on a sofa. He now saw that she was insensible, and was about to ring, when two ladies appeared. The one was his sister, Miss Maxwell, whom we have already met, the other his aunt, and Sir Gilbert Oreburn's sister-in-law, Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Where have you been so long? What on earth have you got?' they exclaimed simultaneously.

'Game poached on the Oreburn manor. I don't know if it is dead or asleep,' he replied, pointing to the sofa.

All were instantly engaged with Fay. A sudden touch of the sprained foot aroused her, and was succeeded by a scream and moan.

'What can we do with her? She is wild,' asked the aunt.

She was, indeed, wild. Her long tangled hair was wet with the dew of heaven, her hands and legs were bleeding from the lacerations of the briers, and her frock was torn to shreds. Her eyes started with terror at the sight of fresh strangers, and her cheeks were bloodless from the night-chill. She sat upright on the sofa and looked about her in a sort of frightened surprise. At first she refused the food that was offered to her; but at last a cup of hot soup was brought, which she devoured greedily.

A sudden movement of the sprained foot produced more screams, and Miss Maxwell discovered where she was hurt. Bandages and compresses were at once ordered, and the astonished maids were sent hither and thither in search of remedies. Miss Maxwell's French was imperfect, but she made the child understand that they wished to relieve her pain, and induced her with much difficulty to submit her foot to be examined. Having yielded, it was remarkable with what Spartan resolution she bore the removal of her shoe and sock, exclaiming,—

'*Non*, *Fée*, thou shalt be wise, thou shalt not scream.' But the effort at self-control produced renewed faintness; and while the foot was bathed she was half-insensible.

Mrs. Moneypenny performed the operation very tenderly, and her soft, plump hands seemed to have been made for such work, though her elaborate costume was anything but domestic. Indeed, both she

‘Lo ! a maiden sleeping sound
On the dank and dirty ground.’—*Page* 85.

and her niece were in somewhat gorgeous dinner dress, and their laces, velvets, and ornaments betokened wealth.

When they had apparently relieved Fay's pain, they sponged the blood from her arms, placed pillows beneath her head and foot, and enveloped her in couvrettes of many hues. Under these influences, the wearied child fell asleep.

At this juncture a footman came to say that his master was waiting.

'For goodness sake let us go!' exclaimed Mrs. Moneypenny. 'He will be furious. Martin, watch by the child. Mind, don't leave her. Give her all she asks for, and call me if she screams.'

They left Fay in all the comfort of warm and sumptuous surroundings, and went to a large, handsomely-furnished dining-room, where a gentleman was seated at the foot of the table. Two servants were waiting; the table was well-appointed, the plate and glass of the handsomest, and the fruit and flowers of the choicest. Mr. Moneypenny appeared to enjoy the luxuries of life as much in private as public.

'Well, you're come at last!' he grumbled. 'Where on earth have you been?'

'Willie has brought home game, and we have had to dress it,' said Lizzie.

'He has picked up the most wretched child you ever saw,' said Mrs. Moneypenny. 'Lizzie says she's French—but I think she must be a born gipsy.'

'What made you bring her here?' asked the uncle sharply.

'Because I had no other place. She is my first brief,' replied Maxwell.

'Well, sit down to dinner now, and don't talk,' said Mr. Moneypenny; and while they obey, we will take a glance at the party.

Mr. Moneypenny is of middle height, spare figure, and shrewd countenance. His eyes are green, shaded with brown, his nose thin and prominent, his lips also thin and compressed. His head is well covered with iron-grey hair, matched by carefully-cut whiskers, and his chin is closely shaven. He looks as if he knew how to keep and use the wealth he has successfully gained. He has the reputation of liberality both as regards his establishment and donations, and is said to give much anonymously. He boasts that he has never truckled to rank, never been ashamed of trade, never desired to rise above his sphere. But he gives the best dinners in the county, and everybody likes to go to them.

He is, what Sir Gilbert called him, a Tyrian, only under the modern name of merchant prince. But he is irascible, cynical, and not without that 'pride which apes humility.' His weakness is a well-appointed house and well-dressed womankind.

Therefore Mrs. Moneypenny is always 'gorgeously attired.' She is a round-faced, blue-eyed, fresh-complexioned lady, who would have pleased George the Fourth, for she is 'fat, fair, and forty.' She overflows with good-humour, fashion, and jewels.

William and Lizzie Maxwell are the children of Mr. Moneypenny's eldest sister, who is the widow of a clergyman. He has given them a first-rate education, and is now enabling his nephew to study for the Bar. They pass their lives between the Castle and London, where their mother resides. She, being an invalid, comes rarely to the country, but she spares her children whenever Mr. Moneypenny demands them.

William Maxwell is reported clever, but is of so reserved a nature that it is difficult to pronounce upon him. He is decidedly a gentleman, both in appearance and manners; and the 'deep grey eyes' that riveted Elinor Oreburn's thoughts, are so keenly sensible and kind that there is reason to suppose the mind beneath must be clear and refined. But he is so quiet that people do not easily understand him.

His sister, Lizzie, is a great contrast to him. She is lively and communicative, and her affectionate female friends have been heard to pronounce her 'fast.' She is good-looking, with dark eyes and hair, and a somewhat high colour; is fond of dress, and dresses becomingly as well as fashionably. She is considered a belle in the Ashton world, and has many admirers.

'Now tell me about this new wonder,' exclaimed suddenly Mr. Moneypenny.

The ladies began together a voluble account of Fay's distresses and appearance.

'One at a time. French, you say? Then she must come from the Court. One of the Oreburn following. They are poor enough for anything,' said Mr. Moneypenny.

'Oh, but Willie and I know all about them,' burst in Lizzie. 'Sir Gilbert is charming, and Miss Oreburn looks too proud to be poor. This ragged child cannot belong to them.'

'You heard what she had to say, and should know her history by this time. You may as well set aside romantic speculations, and tell me what she said of herself. I suppose you understood her?'

'Something about her father, and a photograph she had lost in the wood. She spoke so fast there was no making it out.'

'Not make it out! You who have had Monsieurs enough to teach a parish, and money enough spent on them to clothe all the children!'

'But, uncle, French French, and English French, are not the same language. The Monsieurs, as you call them, and their pupils, couldn't understand one another.'

'Humph! let me judge for myself. Let us go and see this last innovation.'

They all went to Fay, and while they stood to look at her, she awoke. She at once began a storm of words and gesticulations. Mr. Moneypenny told his niece to question her, and all she could make of the replies was that the child had come from France, and was going back again as soon as she had recovered her father's photograph. Her brother bade her make the little girl understand that he would find it for her, if she would be quiet until the morning. Fay seized his hand and thanked him vehemently.

'But you must sleep,' he said in indifferent French. 'And they must bathe your foot.'

She submitted to the operation as soon as Mr. Moneypenny had left the room, and once more fell asleep, with Maxwell's hand in hers, and the word '*cher*' on her lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

'MONSIEUR VILLY! MONSIEUR VILLY!'

'THE fairies have carried her away, miss, and left the pictur' and pipes behind 'em. This is the Fairy Well,' said the indomitable Tommy to Miss Oreburn.

They were standing on the spot where Fay had slept, and Tommy had picked up her scattered treasures, while Elinor was holding the lost photograph. It was early dawn, and they had been up all night. Shreds of the child's clothes, as they hung on the briers, had led them hither.

'She must have slept here, for the impression of her figure is still on the turf,' said Elinor. 'Where can she be?'

'In Fairyland, miss. She wasn't like nobody else,' said Tommy solemnly.

'She must have wandered away. She must be dead. Let us go on,' said Elinor.

A shrill bark was heard as she prepared to proceed, and a dog bounded to the place where Fay had been, and began to scent it. Almost immediately after, a man appeared, and, treading down briers and bluebells recklessly, followed the dog. It was Maxwell. He and Elinor recognised one another.

'I think--I hope—you have found what I am seeking,' he said. 'I have come to look for a photograph lost last night. Will you excuse my asking if you have picked it up?'

'Then you know something of the child?' cried Elinor breathlessly. Is she alive?'

'Do you mean a little French girl? I found her here last night, and took her to my uncle's.'

Elinor uttered a cry, and burst into tears; the anxiety had been too much for her, and she lost all self-command. Tommy also began to cry for company and pleasure.

'She is quite safe. Every care has been taken of her,' said Maxwell kindly.

Recovering herself, she said simply,—

'Oh, we shall be for ever grateful!'

Her face spoke even more strongly than her words. It was full of such a tender, tearful thankfulness!

'The little girl has sprained her foot, and is in great pain,' he said. 'She has been much excited during the night, and my aunt and a servant sat up with her, but failed to quiet her. Our French is so imperfect that we cannot quite understand her, because she speaks so rapidly. Would it be asking too much to beg you to come to her? I believe my aunt has sent for Dr. Hope.'

Elinor did not even pause to consider, but said she would go at once, and, merely telling Tommy to apprise her father how Fay had been found, and where she was, she followed Maxwell. He helped her through the briers, conducted her down the wood-walk, was at her side across the fields, through the gates she had never expected to pass, and up the drive to the house.

Not until she stood on the threshold of Castle House did Elinor Oreburn realise that she was about to meet, for the first time, her dead mother's only sister.

'I scarcely like to go in. I ought not to intrude,' she said, turning pale.

But her companion was already in the hall, and they were greeted by the words, '*Monsieur Villy! Où est Monsieur Villy?*'

'I fancy she is calling for me,' he remarked, smiling. 'If you will come in here, I will fetch my aunt.'

He showed her into a large drawing-room, magnificently furnished. As she stood expectant, she glanced round on a profusion that wealth only could procure. Furniture, pictures, and ornaments were all of the costliest and most modern. It was difficult to move without brushing against some rich article of virtù. She could not help comparing it with the faded tapestries and dusty carvings of the Court. Her eyes rested on the portrait of a lady, evidently by a good artist. Although to her cultivated taste it was surcharged with dress, ornaments, and accessories, she felt intuitively that it was her aunt; and she liked the face. The expression was tenderly good-humoured.

While she was gazing upon it, the original stood in the doorway, pausing to look at her. Mrs. Moneypenny disliked the very name of Oreburn, because she believed her sister's untimely death had been caused by her marriage with a member of that proud race.

She was nervous at encountering Elinor, and wished her nephew had not brought her. She advanced, however, and Elinor turned from the ideal to the real. The matron in elaborate morning costume met the girl in her simple straw hat and inexpensive gingham, with a stiff curtsey, and a 'Miss Oreburn, I believe.'

Elinor had somehow hoped that she would have put her arms round her and kissed her. But, as she did not, she mastered a natural agitation, and said only,—

'I beg your pardon for intruding. I think you are my aunt.'

The word softened Mrs. Moneypenny, and she held out her hand. They stood a few seconds hand in hand, looking at one another, but not speaking.

'You are like Sir Gilbert, Miss Oreburn,' observed Mrs. Moneypenny at last, letting the hand drop.

'I am Elinor. I am reckoned like my father ; but Aimée is said to resemble our mother,' was the rejoinder.

'Then she is very lovely,' said Mrs. Moneypenny sadly.

'Yes ; and very ill,' replied Elinor simply.

The woman's dislike and the girl's reserve were softening them, when a scream from Fay reached them, and Dr. Hope joined them.

'Your patient will not let me approach her, Mrs. Moneypenny,' he said. 'I should not have got out of bed so quickly if I had known you had summoned me to this gipsy Esmeralda ; I thought *you* were dying, at least, from the imperative message. And now I can do nothing for her.'

'Nor any one else,' rejoined the lady. 'She does nothing but moan and jabber French. Poor little soul ! Perhaps you can manage her, Miss Oreburn.'

They all went to Fay, and found her discoursing vehemently with Maxwell, who was trying to make her understand that he had found her picture. At sight of the doctor she screamed, 'Take him from before my eyes !' and hid her face in the pillow.

'Go into the dining-room and get some breakfast,' said Mrs. Moneypenny ; and Dr. Hope went.

When he was gone, Fay looked up, but, perceiving Elinor, again dived into the cushion. Elinor whispered in French that if she would be good she should have her photograph.

'Give me my father ! But I will never be wise ; I will never go to those ogres. I hate them all—all !'

Elinor put her arms round her and embraced her.

'Little Fay, I am so glad thou art found. We have been miserable the whole night on thy account. We have not slept nor seen the bed,' she said.

'*Hein!* thou sayest it. And me—I have lain on this sofa, with Monsieur Villy and the fat lady by my side,' returned the child. 'Now give me my father, Mademoiselle.'

Elinor promised her the photograph if she would go back with her to the Court. She glanced inquiringly from her to Maxwell, then she whispered to the latter,—

'They will kill me if I do.'

Not understanding her, he shook his head.

'They will send me to that black dwarf.'

Again he shook his head.

'*Non?* Then I make the agreement,' she continued aloud, addressing Elinor, and waving her hands like a sibyl. 'Listen! Swear that I shall not be taken to those bad black men, nor to Sister Marie, nor to the dark convent. Swear that I am always the child of my father; then will I return with thee. Then will I be wise. I will learn—I will work. I will wait like the little Tommy. I will make the omelette like Madame the *cuisinière*. I will be the slave of Angel Aimée—the pipe-stuffer of Saar Gilbert. And, Mademoiselle, I will be your —— *très obéissante*. And, Monsieur Villy, I will be your——*fiancée*. Is it not, Monsieur Villy?'

The child's manner was indescribable. Indeed, she seemed scarcely a child at the moment, but one of those anomalies—child-women made old by circumstances. As she turned her large eyes from Elinor to Maxwell, pausing as if to consider her last words, neither of them understood her. Elinor was amazed at the matter of her speech, Maxwell at the manner.

'How old is she?' asked the one.

'We do not know,' replied the other.

'You are talking of me. What are you saying?' she cried.

'We are wondering how old thou art, my little one,' said Elinor.

'Ha, ha! they all wonder. I am eight—ten—twelve,' she replied slowly, counting on her fingers. 'But is it that you promise?'

'We promise all, if thou wilt return with me, and not run away again,' replied Elinor.

'Then give me the photograph of my father.'

Elinor gave it. She hugged it to her breast, kissed it, and shed tears of delight over it. Then, turning suddenly on Maxwell, her great eyes dilated with eagerness, she cried,—

'And thou, Monsieur Villy—thou also promisest? And thou wilt be my *fiancé*, and never, never forsake me?'

Not understanding, he smiled and nodded.

'Now will I return, Mademoiselle,' she continued. 'But I promise not to remain—for if I saw the bad General, I should flee from him; and if I saw Monsieur Villy, I should evade to embrace him. Kiss me, Monsieur Villy; thou art my *fiancé!*'

He stooped and kissed the child.

'*Ma foi*, now have I also a *fiancé*, like the little Marguerite who was embraced by the *vieux* Henri,' she said naively, taking Maxwell's hand. 'I shall not return with thee after all, Mademoiselle.'

'*Noblesse oblige*,' whispered puzzled Elinor.

'Ah, but we are not noble—my father and I,' she replied.

The sound of wheels caused Elinor to glance out of the window, and she saw, with some distress, the car drive pass. Her father had sent for them, and she flushed crimson as she felt the implied anger on his side and insult to the Moneypennys. Maxwell smiled as he took in the situation.

'Thou must come, Fay; my father sends for thee,' she said, covering her confusion.

'Hide me, Monsieur Villy. They banish me, they immure me. I swear to thee I will not go!' screamed Fay.

Mrs. Moneypenny appeared, stiff as buckram.

'Sir Gilbert has sent for you and the child, Miss Oreburn. You are requested to return at once.'

'I am so sorry to give you such trouble,' said Elinor. 'My father has been abroad all night in search of Fay, and I know how anxious he is. Fay, thou must come; I assure thee Madame wishes it.'

Fay screamed, and buried her face in the cushions. Mr. Moneypenny came in, saying they had better let the child alone. He was hastily introduced to Elinor, and his rigid manner and stiff bow chilled her. She apologised for the trouble Fay had given, and thanked him for his endurance.

'I am glad to have been of service,' he said grimly. 'But that conveyance is scarcely fit for the little girl in her present state. Allow me to send her home in my carriage.'

There was a touch of pomposity in this which grated equally on Maxwell and Elinor. The former proposed to carry Fay to the car, the latter bowed, and said she would on no account further inconvenience Mr. Moneypenny. Fay submitted unmurmuringly to Maxwell, who took her in his arms; but the moment the foot was moved, she shrieked with pain.

'She will not bear the jolting of the car,' said he, replacing her on the sofa.

'If you will kindly keep her a little longer, I will return home and consult my father,' said Elinor.

Miss Maxwell came in, and proposed that she should come and have some breakfast. Elinor stood amongst them all, bewildered. She wished to be friends, and had fancied it was her father's place to make the advance; but they were apparently further off from it than he. She declined breakfast, as politely as she could; thanking Miss Maxwell, but, like Fay, taking refuge in her brother, who promised to remain with the little girl while Elinor drove to the Court.

Mr. Moneypenny went out and returned with Dr. Hope, who had been spending an agreeable half-hour with Miss Maxwell over the breakfast-table. Mr. Moneypenny desired that the doctor should examine Fay's foot before Miss Oreburn left. When Fay understood, she made a grimace, but submitted.

Mrs. Moneypenny unfastened the bandages, and while she and Dr. Hope were bending over the swollen, inflamed limb, Fay bade the rest of the party turn their backs.

'You shall not see—you shall not look,' she screamed, waving her arms, and they moved away.

She at once took a large, many-coloured antimacassar from her sofa, and dexterously fastened it to Dr. Hope's back and shoulders; then she extracted the pin from the elegant cap worn by Mrs. Moneypenny, and placed the fabric on his head. Having accomplished this feat with the nimbleness of a monkey, she continued her orders to the others not to look, or she would cry murder.

'It is only a sprain,' said Dr. Hope, rising. 'The foot will be well in a week or so.'

'*V'là*, now you may look!' cried Fay, with a burst of uncontrollable, childish laughter. 'I pay him off; *le coquin!*'

All turned, and saw the unconscious doctor, with a lace mob-cap, lappets, and pink ribbons on his head, and a motley garment hanging gracefully from his shoulder. It was impossible to resist laughing; even Mr. Moneypenny exploded. His wife looked from one to the other, and finally at the doctor. Putting her hand to her head, she joined heartily, shaking a fist at Fay, who clapped her hands and cried,—

'Regard the mirror, Monsieur the doctor. Regard!'

Monsieur the doctor did regard, and did not at first recognise his own reflection.

'Very amusing!' he said when he did, with a dark frown at Fay. 'Skilful manipulation. The gipsies have taught her well.'

Elinor took a hasty leave, with renewed apologies, and as the car drove off, Mr. Moneypenny said to his wife,—

'You made the best match. That *is* a turnout.'

Meanwhile Fay was consoled and amused by recounting to Maxwell how she had managed to travesty 'the little villain of a doctor.'

CHAPTER XV.

UNCONSCIOUS OF THE STORMY FUTURE.

'So you have accomplished the Moneypenny! I felt sure that, woman-like, you would make that acquaintance,' was Sir Gilbert's sarcastic greeting, when Elinor returned from the Castle.

'I have made no acquaintance. I do not think I was welcome, and am sorry I went,' replied Elinor shortly.

'And where is the child?'

'She has sprained her foot, and could not return in the car.'

'How is it proposed the youthful Circe shall travel? If she cannot adventure on the car,—and that is certainly guilty of an occasional jolt,—how can she walk?'

'Mr. Moneypenny has kindly offered his carriage, and'— Elinor paused.

'The greys, I presume,' supplied her father. 'You might have suggested that greys will not stand at our door; but then he might have proposed the chestnuts. What next?'

'I asked to be allowed to leave her until I had consulted you, father. It was impossible to show greater kindness than they have shown the child.'

'We are their debtors. Still your invasion of their Castle, heralded by a knight-errant, was unnecessary bravery. I trust you will curb your courage in future. With your pride and position, I wonder you should have taken the first step.'

'I should not have done so, father, had I not been carried away by anxiety about the little girl; even though I feel that Mrs. Moneypenny is our nearest relation.'

Sir Gilbert looked annoyed, and rang the bell.

'We must send for her, at any rate,' he said, passing over the allusion to his sister-in-law, and adding, when Tommy appeared, 'Order the fly from the Oreburn Arms to be sent to Castle House, for the young lady who left us yesterday. Go with it and present my compliments and thanks to Mr. Moneypenny for his kindness to her, and my apologies for the trouble she has given. You understand, my Baronet?'

'Yes, please, sir.'

'Then your understanding is not in your countenance as usual. Never mind. I will write.'

Sir Gilbert wrote a hasty note, and Elinor escaped to Aimée.

Shortly after the note was despatched, Dr. Hope called.

'You will excuse this early visit,' he said, 'but I am on my way to the Manor, and am anxious to be the bearer of an answer to my message of yesterday.'

'Scarcely early,' languidly replied Sir Gilbert, 'for people who have been astir all night. We have out-heralded chanticleer in our search for Miss Arlington.'

'Might I suggest that it would be judicious to suppress that name in connection with the little stranger?' observed Dr. Hope cautiously.

'Medical men and parsons usually advocate the giving names to "little strangers" rather than their suppression,' returned Sir Gilbert, smiling.

'I mean, Sir Gilbert,' explained Dr. Hope, biting his lip, 'that, as you have undertaken the guardianship of the young lady until the mystery of her birth is cleared, it may be as well not to give her a name that would irritate General Arlington, and cause a scandal in the county.'

'Scarcely guardianship,' replied Sir Gilbert carelessly. 'Butterfield considers me incompetent to be my own guardian. It would be too conceited in me to assume so responsible a title for another. But as the General generously allows us the run of the Court, it would be unkind to refuse his brother's child its run also. As regards the name—well!—you know who says, "What's in a name?" She is welcome to Oreburn if it agree better with his weak digestion. He has a weak digestion, has he not? You must know, if any one does.'

Sir Gilbert looked with inimitable indifference at Dr. Hope, who again bit his lip to conceal annoyance.

'I can have no personal interest in the affair, Sir Gilbert,' he said, avoiding the inquisitive glance. 'But I could not refuse the General's request that I should act as mediator.'

'I understand. But why does he take up your valuable time, who have the halt and the blind waiting for you, when he, who has nothing to do, might intercede for himself and me also?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'He is excitable, and in a—a—critical state. You can scarcely imagine how much affected he was by the unpardonable insolence of that furious child.'

'Ha! Did he weep?' asked the incorrigible Sir Gilbert. 'At any rate he reversed the Shakespearean idea of the "fretful porcupine"; for his hair did not "stand on end" by force of feeling, but fell to the ground.'

Even Dr. Hope smiled at the recollection of the *toupet*.

'I am to understand that you still intend to keep the child here, Sir Gilbert?'

'Certainly, if she condescend to remain; but her movements appear erratic.'

'You will not insist on her being called Arlington, perhaps?'

'I? I insist on nothing. She may be called what she likes. Arlington seems the most natural; but she calls herself Fay. A pretty name enough.'

'Are you resolved not to let her go to school, or to the sisterhood, or into some situation where she may learn to support herself?'

'I never resolve; it is too fatiguing. If the General will receive her, her future rests with him; if he reject his dead brother's daughter, she must take her chances here.'

'That is your decision, Sir Gilbert?'

'I repeat that I never decide. But it seems the natural course of events, and I let the current flow smooth when I can.'

'The General is so anxious to be on friendly terms, that it seems a pity to interrupt the present relations.'

'Too much honour. He is really too amiable. You must have a beneficial effect mentally as well as corporeally. But really the word of the enigma remains with him. I am the scapegoat round whose neck the sins — I beg your pardon—the successes of the Arlingtons are fastened; and this strange child is either a new sin or success. Which must it be?'

'Then I am to tell the General that you intend to keep her until he has made the needful inquiries?'

'Tell him what you like. I am indifferent. Certainly the Arlington manners do not show to advantage in her. The General might find occupation and amusement in mending them.'

'May I see Miss Aimée, Sir Gilbert? She, also, was none the better for the fright and excitement caused by this young tyrant. You will do well to keep them apart.'

Sir Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, and murmured, as Dr. Hope left the room to impress upon his daughters the need of secrecy,—

'Peace, lovely maid, where art thou to be found?'

When the fly arrived, Sir Gilbert was dozing in the library. Hearing wheels, he went to receive Fay. He was so thankful to have found her, that he cared little for results. To his surprise and annoyance, Mr. Maxwell alighted from the vehicle, just as he reached the hall door.

'She would not come without me,' he said apologetically.

'Thank you for bringing her, as well as for saving her,' replied Sir Gilbert, going to the fly, and adding, when he saw the child cushioned up, 'So you have sprained your foot, naughty Fay! Let me help you out.'

'Monsieur Villy! Monsieur Villy! Help me! He knows to carry me without wounding my poor foot,' she shrieked.

'She will let no one else touch her. This is my excuse for my intrusion,' said Mr. Maxwell, returning to the fly and lifting Fay gently out.

Sir Gilbert led the way to the library, and they placed her on the sofa. She forgot her pain as she glanced round.

'I see them all, those wicked men. Quit me not, Monsieur Villy. They will steal me, they will kill me!' she cried.

Sir Gilbert was angered by the unlooked-for visit of Maxwell, as well as by Dr. Hope's embassy; but he knew that he had brought his new liabilities on himself, as he had done his old ones. So he stooped over the child and said in French,—

'Cannot you trust in me as well as in this gentleman?'

'I trust myself most to him. He is my *fiancé*,' was the reply.

Sir Gilbert's passing frown faded into a smile. He turned to Maxwell.

'Your bride-elect is young. May I ask how long the engagement has been sealed?'

Maxwell's face also relaxed. It had hitherto been resolutely set.

'I do not quite understand her, but she made me give her some promise which amused my sister, before she would consent to leave the Castle,' he said.

'How is this gentleman your *fiancé*, Mademoiselle?' asked Sir Gilbert, turning to Fay.

'He swore it me before I quitted the house of the fat lady, and he has repeated it in the carriage. Is it not, Monsieur Villy?' she replied.

Elinor came in, not knowing that Maxwell had brought Fay. Sir Gilbert saw a sudden interchange of glances, and a blush on his daughter's cheek. His slight frown returned, and Maxwell was quick to perceive it. He prepared to take leave, his manner civilly cold. Sir Gilbert at once remembered that he was the obliged, and that something more than mere politeness was due to one who had gone out of his way to serve Fay.

'We should be much indebted to you for saving and restoring this incomprehensible child,' he said, more cordially. 'If you are a sportsman, I trust you will beat the covers where you found so wild a bird. My shooting is at your service.'

'Thank you,' said Maxwell; 'I am going in for hard work, and shall have little time for sport.'

'You will kindly make our grateful acknowledgments to your friends,' said Sir Gilbert.

'They have been already received,' was the reply, as Maxwell moved towards the door.

Elinor held out her hand involuntarily, and he took it quietly. Sir Gilbert followed her example.

'Monsieur Villy ! *Mon fiancé !* You go not so soon. Approach. Embrace me ! ' exclaimed Fay, breaking into sobs.

He turned and bent over her. She threw her arms round his neck, and held him in a somewhat uncomfortable position, until Sir Gilbert interfered.

'You will break his neck, and then you will no longer have a *fiancé*,' he argued.

'Shall he come back, Saar Gilbert? I die of *ennui* till he returns.'

'Not unless you are quiet, and allow him to depart peaceably.' She instantly set her face and was still as stone.

When he was gone, Sir Gilbert threw himself into a chair, took up his glass, and looked at her. The large tearful eyes returned his gaze from a pale face, half lost in a mass of tumbled hair.

'You see me well so?' she asked suddenly. 'What do you think of me?'

'That you certainly are not handsome; but that you have sufficient resolution to be silent when you please. Will you be so amiable as to grant us a peaceful afternoon, in compensation for the last disturbed four-and-twenty hours?'

'*Ma foi*, yes; if you will grant me never to see those detestable gentlemen again.'

'If they will let us alone, I promise to let them alone. But men are uncertain, Mademoiselle.'

'Monsieur speaks with a tone. He makes me afraid. I go to the angel.'

She jumped off the sofa, suppressing a scream as her foot touched the ground, and began to hop towards the door. Sir Gilbert rose and placed himself before it.

'You will be so complacent as to remain here for the present, and allow Miss Oreburn to foment that tumulus I see on your foot,' he said. 'Quiet her, Elinor, if you can. What with her escapades, Generals, Esculapiuses, and knights-errant, I sigh again for the peace of our Breton château.'

Elinor helped her back to the sofa; but she resisted, crying out,—

'*Mon père !* Where shall I go? I jump with *cloche-pied* and they stop me; I run away, they bring me back. I will seek again Madame with the face large as this sofa cushion. Ha, ha! the droll without her *coiffure*, and the *coquin* with it! See you them not, Mademoiselle?'

Elinor had seen them, and joined in the laugh.

'That is Madame *la tante?*' interrupted Sir Gilbert, suddenly interested. 'Lie down and tell me what she is like.'

'*Hein!* You have the curiosity feminine; as Monsieur the restaurateur said to me when I peeped into the *bouilloire*,' she said;

then touching Elinor, engaged with her foot, 'That is how the fat lady did it, Mademoiselle.'

Elinor bathed the swollen foot gently, while the child alternately laughed, cried, and grimaced.

'What of the fat lady?' said Sir Gilbert, sitting down and taking up his glass.

'Madame is amiable, grand, fair, fat, with a costume from *la Mode*, and jewels from the jeweller of the *Impératrice*. She has the magnificent boudoir! It is so full of porcelain, bijouterie, and marquéteries that Monsieur Villy failed to upset a table in advancing my sofa. It is like a shop of Paris.'

'Monsieur—what is he like?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'Monsieur? He has the long face, grave, thin, *blasé*, as Monsieur le Comte de Lille, or as Madame Arbitère. He is like an owl, a *chat-huant*.'

'*Fi donc*, Fay,' interrupted Elinor. 'Thou art ungrateful. Mrs. Moneypenny was gentle and kind, and Mr. Moneypenny polite. They are not ill-looking, and perfectly well-mannered.'

Sir Gilbert laughed, and said,—

'Go on, little Fay—thou amusest me. What else didst thou see?'

Fay, with the instinct of a born actress or mimic, was proud of her success; but a shadow fell on her expressive face as she continued.

'That is what my dear father always said—"Continue, Fay, thou amusest me." I saw a demoiselle elegantly *mise*, who spoke French like a one-eyed magpie, and like that abominable doctor. You promise that he approaches me no more? I saw two *bonnes*, dressed like Madame, and not in costume, as in France. One of them, they call Martin, was fine as the Virgin, and *bête* as a *baudet*. I think "there are many asses in the fair that are called Martin." Ah, Mademoiselle, that is heavenly!—I have ease at last.'

'Then suppose you and I see which can fall asleep first,' suggested Sir Gilbert, whose interest in the inmates of Castle House did not extend to the maids.

'Ha, ha! that is droll—I will say if I am. *Bon soir*, Mademoiselle,' replied the child, closing her eyes and lying back.

Elinor threw a *couvrette* over her, and left them.

They were soon both fast asleep, forgetful of their untoward past, and unconscious of their stormy future.

CHAPTER XVI.

FAY'S EDUCATION.

ADVERSE elements meet peacefully at church. Sheltered by holy walls, as by the cities of refuge of old, enemies find themselves neighbours without the power of showing hate. In country parishes especially they come in contact with one another at times and seasons when, it would seem, enmity would be impossible. They kneel together, pray together, listen to the same exhortations to love and charity, yet are not reconciled.

Thus it was at the pretty church of Ashton. Sir Gilbert Oreburn and his family worshipped there, together with Mr. Moneypenny's establishment, and there General Arlington and his household sought the 'peace that passeth all understanding,' whilst declaring war against his little niece and her protector. In vain the Vicar and his wife preached and laboured, while these, their parishioners, resisted their efforts.

They were all at church two Sundays after the events just detailed. Sir Gilbert took Fay with him, her foot being cured; and Elinor, who had been labouring to teach her how to behave when there, trembled for the result. The child sat demure awhile, with a French prayer-book in her hand, which she could neither read nor understand. Elinor had provided it, not knowing how ignorant she was. No sooner, however, did the service begin, than whispers and restless movements commenced also.

'Mademoiselle, Monsieur le Curé regards me severely, and he has the eyebrows of a *chien caniche*,' were her first words, as she dipped down into the pew. She was soon up again, returning the fixed gaze of the school children, and shaking her head and fist at them. Elinor pressed her shoulder, and told her to look at her prayer-book. 'Tell those children also to look in theirs. The little rogues, they make me laugh! *Je me créverai*,' she whispered, her cheeks swelling with suppressed merriment. In another moment she exclaimed, almost aloud, 'Mademoiselle, see there Monsieur Villy! I go to him! Behold my *fiancé!*'

Elinor restrained her impatience by a 'Not now—after the service.' But she nodded, and made many grimaces, happily unperceived by Maxwell. Then a fresh excitement occurred. She perceived the General and Dr. Hope.

'See there those wicked men! Shield me, Mademoiselle! I hide myself!' she muttered, first taking hold of Elinor, then sitting down on a hassock and covering her face. She remained thus for some time, and was tolerably quiet during the sermon, asking occasionally when Monsieur le Curé would end his long discourse.

Elinor was as thankful as Fay when it was concluded, and took her hastily from the church. She escaped however, and darted down another walk after Maxwell, crying, 'I go to Monsieur Villy! Stop, stop, Monsieur Villy!'

Sir Gilbert looked on amused, and made a step or two after her, but, seeing that she had reached the Moneypenny party at the lych-gate, he paused. Meanwhile, General Arlington joined Elinor.

'I have been much engaged, Miss Oreburn, or I should have called about -about—that child –you understand. I have written to Paris to my agents, and taken all preliminary steps, but I wholly disbelieve in her. Still, so anxious am I to relieve you of the burden, that I am about to go to France to assure myself of the facts, and to prove my anxiety to do what is just. Dr. Hope will accompany me, and we shall leave no stone unturned---no stone unturned, you know—to come at the truth. I have perfect faith in your discretion, and shall trust to your influence with Sir Gilbert to keep the unfortunate affair secret until we have ascertained—ascertained—you understand, as I was saying'—

The speech was cut short by the appearance of Fay, hand in hand with Maxwell. She had positively refused to return without him. To avoid a scene, therefore, he led her back to Sir Gilbert.

'Mademoiselle! Mees Oreburn! I bring Monsieur Villy!' she cried, as she approached; then, seeing the General, added, 'Take that man away!—I hate him!'

'It would be better for all parties if *that child* were kept out of the way' said the General. 'What business has she here? I trust to you, Miss Oreburn, to prevent a repetition of this. Your father is a fool, you know.'

'My father is a man of honour and a gentleman,' said Elinor proudly.

'Leave me at least a shred of my coat, Mademoiselle,' said Sir Gilbert to the child, who was clinging to him.

'Send him away, *le vaurien!*' she cried.

Maxwell looked on discriminately, and thought he might be in the way. He prepared to depart, as he imagined, unnoticed, when Fay darted towards him.

'You go not, my *fiancé*—you stay to protect me!'

Sir Gilbert went quietly to the General, extending, as usual his finger-tips.

'Ah, General, you have a niece gifted with the family excitability,' he said, with his most provoking manner. 'But she is clever and amusing. You will find her invaluable by and by, when—alas! the time must come to us!—when our hair is scant and the grinders are few.'

The General muttered an oath, and Elinor trembled.

'I vow, Sir Gilbert, if you insult me in this way, I'll be your ruin!' he said.

'Not so vindictive in the presence of our most conciliating of Vicaresses,' said Sir Gilbert, as Mr. and Mrs. Tenderton joined them.

The General mastered his anger sufficiently to reply to their questions concerning his intended trip to the Continent, wrung Elinor's hand, and hurried off with a very unpleasant nod and glance at Sir Gilbert.

'I hope the General is not offended with any one,' said Mrs. Tenderton, glancing at Sir Gilbert.

'Mended china soon severs, however excellent the cement,' he replied, smiling; then, turning to Maxwell, he apologised for the trouble Fay had again caused him.

Maxwell had already bowed to Elinor, who stood for a moment alone and in mortal terror. He saw that something was amiss connected in some way with General Arlington and the child. He was going to London the next day, and turned to take leave of Mrs. Tenderton, while the Vicar came up to Fay, and, patting her on the shoulder, said,—

'This is the good little girl who was listening so attentively to my sermon.'

The child, who had been glancing eagerly from one to the other, to endeavour to catch their words, now appealed to Elinor in French. She seemed to have acquired a certain confidence in Elinor, who, rousing herself, came forward.

'Does Monsieur le Curé reproach me that I am naughty?' was Fay's question.

'On the contrary, he thinks you have been wise,' was the reply.

'Monsieur le Curé, you mistake,' continued the child, turning to Mr. Tenderton. 'I was frightfully *gênée* in your church.'

The Vicar and his wife looked round inquiringly. Sir Gilbert was about to explain, when Elinor, fearful lest he should betray the secret on which so much might hang, translated Fay's speech.

'Ah! we must undertake your religious training,' said the Vicar, again patting her on the shoulder.

She fixed her great eyes upon him, then on Mrs. Tenderton, and burst into a loud fit of laughter.

'How they are droll, these religious! What a hideous bonnet wears that woman!'

Sir Gilbert, to conceal his amusement, prepared to take leave, and offered his hand to Maxwell.

'He goes not, Saar Gilbert. Is it, Mees Oreburn? Shall not Monsieur Villy accompany us to the Court? *Ma foi*, we die of *ennui* if he depart!' cried the child. 'Embrace me, *mon fiancé*.'

Maxwell stooped down and kissed her.

'On the two cheeks. But you return, is it not? Mees Oreburn, implore that he return.'

Maxwell glanced at Elinor. They had not even spoken to each other that morning, yet her provoking colour rose, and her father saw it. He cut short the adieus, and the little party separated, Maxwell shaking hands with Elinor.

Fay was again in tears, and lagged behind Sir Gilbert and his daughter as they went through the gate that led into the fields, to wave her arms to Maxwell, who stood to watch them. At a cry of 'See, Mees Oreburn, he regards us,' Elinor turned round, and saw the tall, slight figure of Maxwell just where they had left him. He was alone, and when Elinor looked back he raised his hat. It was many a long day before they met again.

Elinor told her father what the General had said to her, and entreated him not to disclose Fay's history until he returned from abroad.

'You have captivated the ancient Damon, *ma fille;* for me, he looked at me like "*il pape Satan.*" If I mistake not, the young lady will soon tell her own tale. Listen to her now.'

They had entered the woods, and Fay, still behind them, was dancing, and singing vigorously, '*Malbruk s'en va-t en guerre.*' They paused to watch her.

'She has the voice of a Catalani and the movements of a Taglioni,' said Sir Gilbert. 'What would Aimée say to this Sunday amusement? She tells me she intends to undertake her religious, and you her secular education.'

'Only till General Arlington receives her. She is so ignorant,' said Elinor, colouring.

'She is a veritable juvenile Circe,' said Sir Gilbert. 'See how she gathers that May-wreath, and twines it round that terrific hat, making it a magic *coiffure.* Look at her garment of hair as the sun flickers about it. Poor little sprite! Don't torment it with lessons. If you do, it will prove a Caliban.'

But Elinor being conscientious, and Aimée highly religious, deemed it right to teach her, and Aimée began cunningly that same Sunday afternoon. No sooner, however, did she see the drift of her first direct question, as to whether she knew who had created the world, than she exclaimed, '*Pas si bête, mon ange,*' and took refuge in the kitchen with Stokes, for whom she had conceived an overpowering affection.

While she was pouring forth her sorrows to this sympathetic listener, a note arrived from General Arlington to Elinor. It came by special messenger, and was as follows:—

'DEAR MISS OREBURN,—I cannot rest until I have offered you my apologies for a few hasty words that escaped me in my otherwise delightful interview with you this morning. I have conceived so exalted an opinion of your sense and discretion, as well as of your remarkable accomplishments, that it would grieve me deeply to sink in your esteem, and I trust you will consider my slight verbal inaccuracy unsaid. Late events have so recalled disagreeable memories that I am scarcely myself. I have no doubt that my continental trip will set *all* to rights. Trusting to your admirable tact to prevent *éclat*, and with compliments to Sir Gilbert, believe me, dear Miss Oreburn, yours sincerely,

'AUSTIN ARLINGTON.'

Sir Gilbert watched his daughter while she read this letter. He smiled as he saw her countenance change and her head rise.

'Is Damon coy or jealous?' he said. 'May I read my future son-in-law's effusion?'

'It is too absurd!' exclaimed Elinor, passing the sheet reluctantly. 'He made some irritable speech about you, father,' she added doubtfully. 'What can I say?'

'I understand,' replied Sir Gilbert, much amused. 'He probably called me what I consider him. He is a peppery veteran. Say, "All right, General." That is the modern euphuism, and will not take up too much of your time. I shall begin to regard you with veneration after this complimentary missive.'

'I shall not write. What have I to do with him?'

They were interrupted by Fay, who rushed into the room exclaiming,—

'There is a man in the kitchen who has come for me. I evade, I hide!'

In a moment she was enveloped in the heavy window-curtains.

'Send a message. I will see she does not escape,' whispered Sir Gilbert.

Elinor went to consult with Aimée, on whom Dr. Hope's warnings had produced even more effect than on Elinor herself.

'You had better conciliate him, both for father and the child's sake. A few kind lines may do good. Is he not lonely and old?' said Aimée.

And Elinor wrote the few conciliatory lines against her own inclination.

When she returned to Sir Gilbert, she found Fay on a chair, with arm extended and eyes fixed, imitating Mr. Tenderton's preaching, and heard the words, 'There is a child who needs correction. That is Fay.'

Sir Gilbert had enticed her from her hiding-place by the assurance that her uncle was going abroad to-morrow, and no one knew when he would return.

He went abroad, in effect, and stayed so long that people began to wonder if he would ever return. Dr. Hope called to see Aimée before they departed, and assured her they would be back again in a few weeks. He not only left directions to her nurses for strict attention to his prescriptions during his absence, but again advised her, for her father's sake, to aid in concealing Fay's supposed relationship to the General. Aimée, at least, was too unsuspicious and tender to imagine interested motives in so kind and gentle a doctor.

While he and the General were away, Fay accustomed herself to the Court. That is to say, she remained in it as long as nothing crossed her imperious spirit, and ran out of it when offended; frequenting the woods, park, cottages, and even finding her way to the Castle, at her own impulsive, passionate will. She was always brought back by one and another, till at last she knew her way about so well that she returned of her own accord. She was known as 'Mademoiselle Fay, the little French girl of the Court,' and her broken English—for she soon began to make herself understood—amused both rich and poor.

Her education proceeded slowly. She was quick enough, but as idle as backward. Her young teachers knew as little of imparting as she of receiving knowledge, and the lessons frequently ended in tears on all sides; for her fierce tempers frightened Elinor and Aimée, while her equally intemperate repentance touched them. Their own education had been desultory, but hers had been wholly neglected. She showed much musical and dramatic talent, but could not be prevailed upon to learn her notes, or to acquire lessons by heart. One educational scene may serve as a sample of many.

She had escaped from Elinor, who, having resolved to be firm, sent Tom after her. He found her in the stable with Jim, holding a wild kitten that Jim had given her the previous day. He prevailed on her to return with him to Elinor, assuring her that Miss Oreburn had some 'bonbons'—a word he had often heard her use. When she reached Elinor, her arms were covered with blood.

'See here, Mees—what an angel! Monsieur Jim has made me a present of him—but he scratches like *le diable.* Come to my *appartement,* where I have already a mouse.'

She ran up-stairs, followed by Elinor.

'Quick!—quick, Mees, or he evades! There! I lock the door of my *appartement.* He is already under the bed, *le coquin!*'

They entered a large room, and Fay locked the door. She called it her *appartement* because Aimée had relinquished it to her, and said it should be quite her own, if she would learn her catechism and say her prayers. It was one of Aimée's suite, and communicated with her sitting-room by a short passage between walls, at either end of which was an arched baize door. Here the child had arranged her treasures. Her photographs, work-box, and other relics, were placed on a small table, which she moved at will, and which she made alternately a shrine and *conversazione.* This she daily adorned with fresh flowers from the woods, and here she knelt to say a strange jargon of prayers, taught her by many people. Here, also, she held imaginary conversations with her father, before his likeness, confiding to him her griefs, venting her passions, singing, dancing, or acting.

She brought all sorts of strange, unclean things to this room, to the scandal of the housemaids. Pantomimes in French and English were acted by them over frogs, mice, newts, beetles, snails, birds' nests, and mosses, in which her language was not choice. She had a special aptitude for words that she should not use, and picked them up everywhere. When Mary, her particular maid, remonstrated, she would say,—

'Drat it! Marie, *ma mie*—it is mine *appartement.* Boderation! I vill *balayer.* Tell not de ole fool Arbitère. I ask *mon Baronète. Le petit drôle*, he admire *mon lézard.* Saar Gilbert—Mees Aimée—dey give permission. 'Ang it! *c'est moi qui suis maîtresse ici. Va-t'en.*'

'You shouldn't call names, Ma'mselle. I can't, and I won't, clean up such messes,' Mary would say.

Amongst these 'messes' Elinor found herself.

'Let me bind up your arm—it is covered with blood; you are staining the counterpane,' she said, as Fay peeped under the bed in search of her kitten.

'When I have caught Villy. I call him Villy, Mees, after my *fiancé. Hein!* here is the mouse. I have you now, *mignon!* He knows the mouse, Mees; see how he creeps after it. Ha, ha! *le coquin!*'

She trailed a dead mouse before the kitten, which came forth cautiously.

'Fay, how can you?' said Elinor, shuddering.

'Have no fear, Mees; it is dead. Villy shall not eat it. I have a *père la chaise* and a *mausolée*, where I bury him to-morrow, grandly, for he has caught my Villy.'

She seized her kitten by the tail, and finally allowed Elinor to bind up her arm.

'Now wilt thou be wise and say thy lessons?—for I have much to do,' said Elinor importantly and seriously.

'*Ma foi*, Villy and I—we will help you. Villy! Villy! come, that we aid Mees Oreburn,' shouted Fay; then, changing her tone—'Thou desirest not Monsieur Villy, my *fiancé*—is it, Mademoiselle?'

This question had been frequently repeated since the Sunday of Maxwell's adieus.

'Fay, I will neither teach nor reward you, if you say such things; you annoy me much. Where did you learn to be so unlike a child?—who taught you to call a gentleman your *fiancé?*'

'All the world. Susette, Madeleine,—even *la veuve* Noble, who was old as Arbitère,—had their *fiancés*. You shall have one, but not Monsieur Villy. Ha! you look *revêche*. Hush! we are near the door; Madame hears everything. Approach the window—there.'

Fay impelled Elinor to a seat in the window, and curled herself up by her side. Fixing her wild, flashing eyes upon her, she continued:

'Listen, Mademoiselle. You have to love you, Monsieur your father, Aimée, Arbitère—*hein!* I want not her,—your brother in the distant land, Monsieur Dyze, the bad General, and the abominable doctor; I have only my Father in heaven and Monsieur Villy.'

'Fay, thou hast us all,' said Elinor, taking her hand.

'Not certain. You love me when I am wise; my father loves me when—I am like *le diable;* Monsieur Villy loves me always—for is he not my *fiancé?* Will you promise not to wish for him, or take him from me?'

'I cannot promise what I do not understand.'

'You grow red like Aimée when the villain doctor talked religious to her last week. Say not to the Arbitère; but I was hiding under the sofa.'

'It is wrong to hide and listen. Come and say thy lessons.'

'I cannot. I hate the lessons. Hark! the thrush calls me, and I promised to go when he called. I must not break my promise. You will not promise, because you fear to break it. But if you take my *fiancé* from me, I will—I will—tear out your fine blue eyes, Mees.'

'How frightful! how wicked!' exclaimed Elinor, shrinking and letting go the hand.

Fay withdrew to the other end of the window-seat. Her flaming eyes drooped when she saw the look of mingled pain and anger in Elinor's face.

There was a strange attraction and repulsion between them. It was the quiet river and the rushing torrent; awaiting, dreading, raging, yet mingling at last. They were silent awhile; then Elinor rose to leave the room. She had scarcely reached the door when Fay was on her knees at her side.

'Mees Oreburn—Mademoiselle—Elinor—pardon, pardon! I will say my lessons. I will sweep my room. I will be wise and orderly. Go not away till thou hast embraced me. I will do all except yield you Monsieur Villy.'

Elinor turned. That last word stayed for an instant her ready forgiveness; but it was only an instant. Peace was soon made, and she grew hopeful again. But another phase succeeded, and while Fay was yet on her knees, she said,—

'Angel Aimée tells me to say my prayers when I have been naughty. I will tell my paternosters to you, Mees Oreburn.'

The bewildered Elinor sat down, while Fay poured out a compilation of prayers that would have puzzled a bishop. With unexampled rapidity she slid over bits from Catholic missals and Protestant prayer-books, petitions to the Virgin and the saints, and finally the names of all the people she had ever known, beginning with her father and concluding with 'Monsieur Villy, and Villy *mon chat*.'

'Now I am wise as Monsieur le Curé!' she cried, starting up. 'But I forget le Boykeen. I pray for him because he belongs to you,' she added, falling again on her knees, and clasping her hands. 'I pray also to hear his letter.'

'Le Boykeen' was Mr. Oreburn, Sir Gilbert's son, called by his sisters, familiarly, Boykin. Fay was very inquisitive about him, and never heard his name without asking a multitude of questions. A letter had arrived from him that morning, which had excited her curiosity, but Sir Gilbert had not chosen to gratify it. She was, however, made happy before the day closed.

Mr. and Mrs. Tenderton called, and in the course of conversation inquired for the young man in America. Sir Gilbert, heedless of Fay's presence, drew forth his letter.

'My son is not a chip of the old block, but a filing from the modern iron-pig,' said Sir Gilbert. 'He writes as if he had conquered the world, because he has stumbled on a grain of gold. Strange that the lust of gold should have peopled new worlds from the days of the Golden Fleece and the Raleighs to the Boykins!'

'And ruined old ones by luxury and sensual gratification,' said Mr. Tenderton.

'Hear what he says. It is not fatiguingly long,' said Sir Gilbert.

'My dear Father,—I have found it at last. I have stumbled on real gold, and shall soon be rich as Crœsus. Nobody knows that I have caught this gleam of golden sunlight. We will pay off the debts and clear the whole property yet. I hope you all like the Court. My farm is flourishing, and I do not forget the main chance while keeping my eye on the lesser. Love to the girls. I will write at length soon. Tell Aimée she must give up her couch. The lion may be couchant, but not Una. What of this wonderful *Fée* of whom my sisters write so much?'

'That is me!—that is me!—he knows me!' interrupted Fay, unable longer to restrain herself. 'Oh, *le beau garçon*, Boykeen?'

'Victorious again!' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'But Boykin is anything but a *beau garçon*—he has red hair, small eyes, and the *nez retroussé*.'

'*Ma foi*, then I like best Monsieur Villy!' cried Fay, with a movement of disgust, withdrawing towards Mr. Tenderton.

Sir Gilbert finished his son's letter, and spoke of him affectionately. He said that he had relinquished his artistic and scientific studies to go to America, in the hopeless pursuit of sufficient wealth to clear the family estates; but that he would have preferred his remaining with him. Elinor and Aimée broke forth in his praise, calling him philanthropist, missionary, and all names that might interest Mr. Tenderton in him; while Fay looked from one to the other inquiringly, and at last asked solemnly if he knew his catechism. Sir Gilbert assured her that he did.

'I saw a little girl learning it, and teaching Miss Oreburn's class last Sunday,' said Mr. Tenderton, smiling.

'Ah, Monsieur le Curé, you mistake. I vas vatching Mees Oreburn teach and de childs learn. How dey are *bêtes*—dey are stupe!'

Sir Gilbert told her maliciously to show Mr. Tenderton how Elinor taught the children, and she acted the class.

'First dey make de *révérence* to Mees *comme-ci*, den to me *comme-ça*. Mees salute and I incline myself. Mees sit on a—a *escabeau: dur! dur!* Me, I try not laugh. De childs feign to look deir books, and regard me. Dey try not laugh. So we make grimaces.'

'What does Mrs. Tenderton do?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'You can act me, Mademoiselle,' said that lady tartly.

'Madame walk about and teach all de childs, *comme-ci*. Dey make de *révérence*, and she salute dem, *comme-ça*. Dey look deir book ven she come, and look at me ven she go. Dat is like Mees Oreburn and me.'

'You must learn to work, and not mimic. You will make every one dislike you,' said Mrs. Tenderton severely.

'So say Mees ; but if dey 'ate me, I 'ate dem, so dere is no loave drop.'

And this was the finale of Elinor's day's lessons !

CHAPTER XVII.

FAY'S CHOICE.

VARIOUS reports were circulated concerning the prolonged absence of General Arlington and Dr. Hope. It was at last ascertained that the General had been ill, and was recruiting in the balmy South. Sir Gilbert wished them back again, on Aimée's account as well as Fay's, for it was evident that the child's impetuosity was telling unfavourably on the nervous girl, and that she needed medical care.

Mr. Butterfield grew more and more anxious about the affairs, and confided his anxiety to Elinor, who had the weight of every one on her shoulders, and began to look grave beyond her years. Sir Gilbert had got immersed in brick and mortar, and was bitten with the agricultural distress mania.

'The Court may go to the dogs, provided the cottages are made into palaces,' said Mr. Butterfield pathetically. 'It is useless to try to retrench in the establishment, as you do, Miss Oreburn, if Sir Gilbert spends a fortune in building models. The peasants are fifty times as well off as Sir Gilbert, for they know what they can spend, and he does not The General will come back and buy us all up, especially if Mademoiselle remain.'

'The poor people are so badly off and so ill-housed !' was all that Elinor could say, whose instincts were with her father, while her interests were with the steward.

Meanwhile the usual amount of county visiting went on, and Elinor became, if not an acknowledged belle, a much-admired young lady. Amongst others, it was reported that Mr. Dyce Pouncefort had transferred his affections, much to the satisfaction of his parents, from Miss Maxwell to Miss Oreburn. He was the only son and heir of a large property. His father and mother were old friends of Sir Gilbert's ; and Lady Clementina Pouncefort had taken a great fancy to Elinor. Her son Dyce, however, had fallen in love so often, that she despaired of his unstable affections being fixed on any one ; nevertheless, she used every maternal ruse to bring him and Elinor together.

Hitherto Mr. Moneypenny's sparkling niece, Miss Maxwell, had been the belle of the Ashton world, but now Elinor innocently competed for that position. The rival ladies rarely met, however, for the inmates of the Castle continued as resolute in avoiding intimacy as did Sir Gilbert, and were never invited to the same parties.

Such was the position of affairs when General Arlington and Dr. Hope returned.

A few days after this event, the doctor called on Mr. Butterfield, and had a long interview with him; the result of which was that they walked together to the Court. Dr. Hope had a large bundle of manuscripts with him, of which he seemed particularly careful. They were shown into the library, and Sir Gilbert joined them at once.

'Returned at last!' he said, shaking the doctor by the hand almost heartily. 'I am so glad! Come and see Aimée; she has not been so well since you left.'

'We have come to consult about Mademoiselle, Sir Gilbert,' said Mr. Butterfield.

'Ah, I forgot! but she will wait while we visit Aimée.'

Mr. Butterfield shrugged his shoulders, while Sir Gilbert carried off the doctor.

When they reached Aimée's sitting-room, they heard her voice mingling with the louder tones of Miss Fay. As Sir Gilbert opened the door, the child was telling Aimée that she had heard the hall bell ring, had gone to peep, and 'Behold *le vilain docteur!*' she cried, as that gentleman followed Sir Gilbert into the room.

Fay greeted them with a grimace, and Aimée with visible agitation. Dr. Hope glanced from one to the other with some surprise, for during his absence the one seemed to have shot into girlhood, the other into womanhood. Fay ran out of the room, and Sir Gilbert followed. Dr. Hope sat down by Aimée, and shook her hand gently. Neither spoke for a few seconds, then the doctor went into the natural professional inquiries, and Aimée recovered her self-possession.

'I have really tried to do what you told me,' she said, with a slight flush on her pale cheek.

'You are always good—always patient,' was the rejoinder; while the speaker gazed—as who would not?—on the marvellous loveliness before him.

'You have been so long away,' said Aimée simply. 'I never missed a doctor before.'

'I am glad,' was the reply. 'I shall not leave you again.'

When he went down-stairs, he found Mr. Butterfield and Elinor awaiting him in the library. The steward had sought Elinor as his one stay in emergency. Sir Gilbert came in shortly. He had succeeded in pacifying Fay, and had sent her back to Aimée.

'What a solemn conclave!' he said. 'Is it business? What is that mass of paper?'

'These are the written communications received by General Arlington concerning Mademoiselle de Saint Ange,' replied the doctor.

'Pray burn the eight mortal heads of your hydra, and let us begin with the immortal—I mean our charming niece.'

'I am afraid we must go through the papers, Sir Gilbert,' said Dr. Hope blandly.

'They are all in French,' put in Mr. Butterfield, 'and Miss Oreburn has kindly consented to translate them for my benefit. I think you may spare Sir Gilbert the lection thereof, and tell him what you have discovered.'

'Admirable Butterfield!—indomitable Elinor!' said Sir Gilbert. 'There is a rare old Law Dictionary in French on the fourth shelf that may be serviceable. *Ma fille*, if you add law to your various accomplishments, you can present yourself at a female law-copying establishment for improvement, and who knows but we may see you at the Bar? Ladies are the big-wigs now-a-days. And what of this "protracted inquiry," as the parliamentary reporters say? Pray begin, Dr. Hope.'

The doctor said that General Arlington had spared neither time nor money to arrive at the truth concerning Fay. He had ordered the Messieurs Aigret, his French agents, to trace Mr. George Arlington's course during his residence abroad. 'Rather erratic!' put in Sir Gilbert. He had himself set inquiries on foot concerning his possible marriage, and, by advertisements and otherwise, endeavoured to discover if it was registered—but wholly without result. Mr. Arlington had certainly passed as M. de Saint Ange at one time of his life; but he had so often changed his name with his fortunes, that the lawyers found it next to impossible to trace him. He had come to them at stated periods for his money, but always alone. They had never seen a child with him, and could learn nothing concerning her, beyond what the Sister had stated, which was, that a Monsieur de Saint Ange had died at an inn at Dinan, leaving a little girl, who had been taken to England, at his request, by a Sister of Charity. The name of Arlington had never transpired, and the unfortunate gentleman was reputed French. Dr. Hope said that so great was the General's desire to be just to the child, that he had gone himself into all sorts of places to obtain intelligence of her—had, in effect, brought on severe illness by his labours, and failed utterly!

'Poor fellow! Wandering to and fro on the earth!' interposed Sir Gilbert. 'And the Hydra?'

'These papers contain all the letters written to Messrs. Aigret by Mr. Arlington, and those received concerning him by that well-known firm,' continued the doctor, 'as well as the receipts for moneys paid for his support by the General.'

'And the result of this fatiguing, expensive, and dangerous quest?' said Sir Gilbert.

'That is apparent, Sir Gilbert. Nothing can be proved concerning the child.'

'Albeit a respectable Sister of Charity received her from her father, and brought her to his brother, together with a letter from that brother,' said Sir Gilbert.

'Not to the General, Sir Gilbert,' said the doctor, hesitating.

'To me, then,' rejoined Sir Gilbert haughtily.

'And I was to say,' continued the doctor, 'that Mr. Arlington's writing, as seen in these letters, is quite different from that of his letter to you, Sir Gilbert.'

Sir Gilbert's colour rose: but he controlled himself.

'Our respectable friend, the General, is slightly obtuse—he always was obtuse. Does he reject the letter?'

'Not exactly; but you will remember that it has no signature, save the A., and does not even contain the name of Arlington. The General does not for a moment doubt you, Sir Gilbert; but the lawyers affirm that any one may have palmed off any child upon you under the circumstances.'

'And the photographs?'

'That even they may have been obtained by fraud. One moment, Sir Gilbert. He does not deny that the girl may be his brother's child, but he cannot receive her as his legitimate niece without stronger proofs than are, as yet, forthcoming.'

'And what does the too credulous invalid propose?'

'To relieve you of the burden and to educate the child at a distance. To take her as she stands, in short.'

'That is very unsteadily, I fear. You mean that he will not receive her at the Manor, give her his name, and relieve me of my responsibility?'

'He does not know that she has a right to his name. He wishes to avoid publicity, and spare her.'

'A truly affectionate uncle! She shall decide. Butterfield, do me the favour to ring the bell.—Already, my Baronet! I trust you were not *aux écoutes*. Send Mademoiselle here. She is with Miss Aimée.'

'Yes, sir,' said Tom, who must have been close at hand.

'Why did not the General preside himself at this solemn assembly? I should have found myself equal to the emergency,' continued Sir Gilbert.

'He was afraid of getting excited, and wishes much to avoid any dispute with you, Sir Gilbert, or possible collision with the child.'

'Too amiable! Ah, here she comes!'

Fay entered with a black cat in her arms. She had on a thick white frock, high to the throat, a black apron, much awry, and a crimson sash. Her hair was now drawn off her face, and tied loosely with crimson velvet, so that it hung over her back and shoulders like a black veil. It was of extraordinary length, in much disorder, and had a fern frond clinging to it. She walked with a sort of theatrical air to Elinor's side, and faced Dr. Hope. Tears were gleaming in her black eyes, while a mocking smile played about her mouth.

'Angel Aimée commands me to ask your pardon, Monsieur,' she said. 'She affirms that I have been rude. Is it that you find me so?'

'On no account—not at all,' stammered the doctor, taken for once at unawares, and looking at the strange child, or girl, or witch, or whatever she seemed to him, in amazement.

'*Dieu merci*, for I hate the pardons, and feel not sorry; I shall tell Angel Aimée. You want me, Saar Gilbert?' she said, laughing loud, and stroking her sleek Tom.

'What have you in your hair, Fay?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'Absolutely noting. Ah, I perceive! I was in despair, and Angel Aimée permit us—*mon Villy et moi*—to go in search of this *fougère* for her painting.'

'Fay, I ask your particular attention,' said Sir Gilbert.

'*De grâce*, Saar Gilbert, remove your lunette, or I must laugh,' she cried, exploding.

'Fay,' continued Sir Gilbert, letting his glass drop, 'you have to choose between—dare I breathe it?—two middle-aged gentlemen. Which shall it be—General Arlington or your humble servant? Which do you prefer?'

'Vich do I prefer of you or dat General? Vy, I 'ate de General; and you—I loave you sometime.'

'Will you be sent to a *pension* by the General, and grow up elegant and accomplished; or will you remain here, wild and uneducated?'

'I vill have noting to do vid de General; and Mees Oreburn she teach me accomplishment—is it not, Mees Oreburn? I already sing and play, and say de hymn vich Angel Aimée teach me.'

'General Arlington will educate you, Mademoiselle, and see that you do not want,' said Dr. Hope, catching her eye.

'Vat does he mean? I vill not go! I vill not go!' shrieked Fay, letting her 'Villy' fall, and throwing her arms round Elinor. 'Saar Gilbert, Elinor, say that I shall not go! I shall run away and drown myself in the great ocean!'

'Be pacified, Mademoiselle. As long as your philanthropic relative leaves us a roof, you shall share it, and then—the stars!' replied Sir Gilbert.

'*Ah, grand merci*, Saar Gilbert! It is charming, *à la belle étoile. Mon père et moi*, we loved it when it made fine—but when it made rain, *ma foi!*'

'You see our niece and ward!' said Sir Gilbert to Dr. Hope. 'We need not be ashamed of her. She is handsome enough. Will you make our compliments to the General, and say that she has honoured me by her choice. But I shall still like to talk this little affair over with him personally, when his nervous system permits.'

'Are you quite resolved to keep her here?' said the doctor, tolerably indifferent to what became of Fay, provided she did not interfere with his interests.

'You had better make no resolutions,' said cautious Mr. Butterfield.

'I shall remain for ever vid Saar Gilbert!' shouted Fay, and suddenly disappeared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FAY AMONGST THE HOUNDS.

GENERAL ARLINGTON had returned from the Continent in excellent health and spirits. He felt and looked ten years younger than when he left England, and blessed his foreign tour and his doctor for what he considered a new lease of life. He resolved to make good use of the tenure, and to enjoy himself. He was thinking of everything but his niece while Dr. Hope was at the Court with his manuscripts. He conceived that he had washed his hands of her, for even an Oreburn could scarcely be fool enough, he thought, to keep a child of her calibre and doubtful parentage. He meditated the sacrifice of a hundred or so to get rid of her, and thought he should be acting handsomely, even if she did belong, in any circuitous way, to his brother. He conceived that he had done all that the strictest justice required by setting his lawyers to work. True, he had let them understand, through his unwearied protégé and doctor, that he had not a very ardent desire to find Fay to be his lawful niece; but they had made inquiries, nevertheless, and failed to hear of her. Such being the case, he could conscientiously survey his possessions, hug himself in the happy reflection that his ancient rival was in his power, and think of marriage.

This was in his mind when Dr. Hope returned, and gave an account of his interview with Sir Gilbert. General Arlington got into a furious passion, as was to be expected; but, cooling more speedily than usual, merely said, 'Let the ass follow his bent. I have him in my power, you know. How is Miss Oreburn?'

Dr. Hope did not altogether like this question. He was aware of his patron's weakness for the ladies, but had hoped that he had supplanted them by his more than filial care of late. He was, however, too wary to let this appear, and gave a tolerably truthful report of Elinor, qualifying it by remarking that she began to look quite *passée*.

'Pshaw! she is barely nineteen!' said the General. 'I shall take no further steps until this party at the Pounceforts is over. We shall all meet there, you know; and not a word about the girl, you know, Septimus—not a word.'

'Dyce Pouncefort is reported over head and ears in love with Miss Oreburn,' said Dr. Hope.

'I don't believe it. He was desperate about Lizzie Maxwell when we went away; but I suppose you cut him out there, Septimus. Ha! you are a cunning dog. Too many for him, you know. She'll have a pretty fortune. I had my eye on her once, but I won't interfere with you. Ha, ha!'

The General rubbed his hands and looked sly; while the doctor coloured and suppressed some impatient interjection.

'And you say *that girl* is more odious than ever?' said the General, who, in spite of his best intentions, could not help reverting to Fay.

'Much. My mother tells me that the whole county is laughing at Sir Gilbert's gipsy ward.'

'They don't know her name, then?' asked the General eagerly.

'They know nothing about her, fortunately, except that she is French. Miss Whiston is rich about it.'

'Ha, ha! Give her the right key-note and she is sure to keep up the tune,' laughed the General.

While Fay was being thus discussed at the Manor, she had again disappeared from the Court, and Elinor was in search of her. She had intimated her intention that morning of seeing the Squire's hounds run, so Elinor trusted she was not far. She had made friends with Mr. Napoleon Hope, and always knew when the hounds were to meet. Napoleon was the doctor's only unmarried brother, and one of the Squire's six uneducated sons. He was a good fellow in his way, and Sir Gilbert had taken a fancy to him; so he came occasionally to the Court, and always took refuge with Fay. He kept her *au courant* of all the meets, drills, and croquet parties, so that she was general referee in such matters. As the hounds were to meet somewhere near the park, Elinor hurried after Fay in that direction.

She heard the hounds, and, by a *detour* through the park, reached a hillock whence she could see them. There, assuredly, was Fay, surrounded by horses, dogs, grooms, and huntsmen. Half the county hunted with the Squire's famous pack, and Elinor had not the courage to face them ; not even to bring back Fay. The park wall divided her from the meet, and she went towards a gate opening from the park into the field, whence she could see it, and possibly attract Fay. She heard her sharp clear voice above the rest, and saw that she was attended by Mr. Dyce Pouncefort, Mr. Napoleon Hope, and one or two other gentlemen, who seemed highly amused with her.

'Ah, Monsieur Napoleon, is dat your 'orse? Dat he is grand! *Ma foi*, Monsieur Dyze, you are *magnifique* in pink. Why call dey de *rouge* pink for de gentlemens? Saar Gilbert he promise dat I hunt some day, if I am wise as de Queen of Sheba. But I must go. Mees Oreburn, she scold if she tink I am here.'

She turned towards the gate, and saw Elinor within.

'Mees Oreburn! see Mees Oreburn!' she cried, and ran towards her, followed by Mr. Dyce Pouncefort.

Dawdling Dyce, as Sir Gilbert called him, was a fair young man of about five-and-twenty. He was sufficiently well-looking and gentlemanlike, and carried with him the weight of his father's acres and his mother's title. We are all supposed to have our idiosyncrasy, and his was that he could never make up his mind to propose, or to pronounce an *r* before a hard vowel. He rode well, and, as he took off his hat to Elinor, looked well also.

'We seized on Mademoiselle, as she was looking over the gate,' he said. 'She rejoices at a meet. So glad you came, Miss Oreburn! Isn't it a jolly sight? We shall have the pleasure of your company to-mowow?'

Dyce was wont to call Elinor an awfully clever girl, and as such, much as he admired her, he rarely got far beyond this style of conversation. She was not one to start subjects readily, therefore when they met they were neither original nor entertaining. When he rode off and joined his hunt, Fay, lingering to look after him, burst into a laugh.

'*Ma foi*, Monsieur Dyze he talk more to me than you, Mees Oreburn; but I like Monsieur Villy best. Napoléon le Petit, also, he amuse me. See how well he rides!'

'You are getting too old to run after hounds like the peasant boys,' said Elinor. 'I wish you would learn to be like other girls.'

Fay paused, and fixed her great eyes on Elinor. She held a whip that Napoleon Hope had given her, and began to flourish it uneasily. Her hat was half off, her hair astray, her dress and boots spotted with the clay-soil of the ploughed field. Elinor, on the contrary, was exquisitely neat, in her simple morning attire and broad straw hat. They were a pretty contrast, as they stood beneath a group of fine old cedars, the glory of the park, within view of the field of red-coats, dogs, and hunters.

'Elinor, *ma mie*,' began Fay, with unusual gravity, and speaking French, 'I think I had better quite run away.' Her one idea of getting rid of herself was ever running away. 'I am a *gêne* to every one but Saar Gilbert and Stokes. If I evade, will you promise not to seek for me?'

'Fay, you talk much nonsense. You know that we desire your good, and wish to make you sensible and ladylike,' said Elinor.

'Impossible; you have said so yourself. "Fay is wholly intractible." And, *hélas*, it is true. I will seek Monsieur Villy, *mon fiancé*, who lives in London.'

'You will do no such thing. You do not understand how much may depend on your conduct. Your uncle'—

'*De grâce* call him not so. I will not have him.'

'General Arlington, then. You may do my father much harm if you run about the country and get talked of and annoy him. He is angry with us already for not yielding to his wish of sending you to—to school.'

'Who cares for his anger, the old villain?' cried Fay, slashing off the leaves of the fern with her whip. 'But, Mees Oreburn, I would rather die than harm Saar Gilbert.'

'Then you will be prudent and learn—you will be quiet when with Aimée'—

'*Hein!* that is our rattlesnake, the doctor. I call him so, because he fascinates Aimée like that beast I read of to you yesterday. I swear I will torment him and the bad General whenever I can, but I will poison myself for Saar Gilbert. Embrace me, and I swear to be wise.'

'You should not swear, Fay, it is wrong,' said Elinor, kissing her. 'But I hold you to your promise to be good.'

'I keep it as long as possible,' she replied, taking Elinor's hand, and walking homewards thoughtfully. She was trying to realise what her friend meant by danger to Sir Gilbert.

The next evening Elinor and her father were at Elmhampton, the residence of the Pouncefort. The party was large, and amongst the guests was Miss Maxwell. She was staying with some friends who lived near, and came with them, her uncle and aunt not having been invited. She greeted Elinor with ostentatious zeal, and referred to their meeting at the Castle. She was magnificently dressed, and contrasted with Elinor, who was always simple and elegant. She talked much, and made great efforts to attract notice, particularly Dr. Hope's.

To Elinor's annoyance, General Arlington took her in to dinner, and paid her marked attention. She had Dyce Pouncefort on the other side, who was also very polite; but he had not quite relinquished Miss Maxwell, and wavered between her and Elinor.

The real by-play of this ordinary county dinner-party lay between General Arlington and Elinor, and Dr. Hope and Miss Maxwell. Sir Gilbert's manner to the General was too apparent to be called by-play, for he hit him whenever he could.

When the ladies returned to the drawing-room, Elinor and Miss Maxwell entered into conversation. The latter said, incidentally, that her brother was still in London, working hard, and that when he came down she should return to her mother. Then she asked about Fay, who, she said, had paid her aunt several visits—rushing into the house with a *bon jour*, and out of it with an adieu—quite unsolicited. Elinor inquired for her aunt, and expressed a wish to know more of her.

'Oh, there is war to the death between the Oreburn and Moneypenny,' said Miss Maxwell.

General Arlington and Dr. Hope came in first, and, as the former went straight to Elinor, Miss Maxwell moved towards Dr. Hope, and engaged him in earnest conversation.

'I am delighted to see you looking so well, Miss Oreburn,' said General Arlington in a low voice. 'I assure you I have thought much of you since—since we parted, you know, and you wrote me that amiable letter. I have been so much engaged, you know, and so ill, that it seemed as if I should never get back, but I trust we shall be better friends than ever, now all is settled, you know. I hope to call in a day or two, as Sir Gilbert wishes it—not that I have anything particular to say to him, you know. You understand me, don't you, Miss Oreburn?'

To Elinor's relief, the other gentlemen entered, and Dawdling Dyce sauntered up to her.

'I saw you and Mademoiselle in animated discourse after we parted yesterday,' began Dyce. 'How awfully amusing and natuwal she is! Her Fwench-English is delicious!'

The General looked angry, and Elinor alarmed, but Dyce was impervious. He sat down by her, and she turned the conversation to the hunt. Then she was asked to play, and the gentlemen followed her to the piano, where, even when most shy and nervous, she was at least free. The General was engrossed by her playing, which was indeed beautiful—so were most of the others, who paid her the unusual compliment of silence.

'She is a quiet flirt; and you are always at the Court,' said Miss Maxwell to Dr. Hope, who was really interested in the charming bit of Mendelssohn that Elinor was playing.

'Decidedly a flirt, and not a beauty,' said the doctor, with a reassuring glance at Lizzie.

And so the evening sped on, with nothing more important to this story than the desultory conversation already cited. Dr. Hope and Miss Maxwell sang a duet, then each sang alone; and other guests performed. But Elinor's pleasure was spoilt by the General's persistent attention.

CHAPTER XIX.

GENERAL ARLINGTON PROPOSES.

'NOW listen to this, Mees Oreburn. Hear how divinely it sounds. You improvise, why should not I? I cannot read those notes that mount to the sky—I sing them instead—it is more elegant and delicate.'

Fay and Elinor were at the piano, disputing, as usual, over a lesson; and Fay was singing instead of playing a passage.

'You are too provoking and conceited, Fay! Do you think you can improve upon Mozart, the most elegant and delicate of all composers?'

'Ah, *ma mie*, it is that the air comes to my soul, and not to my fingers. They were made for use, and not for cramping and stretching over these keys. Hark! I hear the hall bell. Now we shall finish, and I will complete my lesson by a roulade that shall convince you of my talents.'

Fay, at the top of her voice, sang a cadence that would have made a success in public; and while it was yet echoing through the large drawing-room, the door was thrown open, and General Arlington announced.

'Magnificent!' he said, as Elinor rose.

'I will face him, and then disappear *en dame*,' said Fay.

He greeted Elinor eagerly; then, with a glance at Fay, whom he did not recognise, said, with a bow,—

'Your sister, I presume?'

'No,' murmured Elinor. 'It is'—

'Mademoiselle de Saint Ange,' cried Fay, standing erect before him for a moment; then, sweeping a curtsey *à la Grande Duchesse*, walked majestically out of the room.

The General's eye followed her, and saw little but a mass of glossy raven hair, enveloping the tall figure of a young girl—for, whatever her age, she no longer looked a child.

'Tell my father that General Arlington is here, Fay,' said Elinor, as the door opened and closed with a resonant bang.

The General looked fierce and hot, but, recovering himself, took a seat and began a complimentary speech on Elinor's splendid voice.

'It was not I who was singing,' said Elinor, hesitating.

'Ha! a born actress. Why not educate her for the stage?' said he. 'I will propose it to Sir Gilbert. I am glad to find you alone, as I wish to right myself in your opinion, you know. You will see, with your wonderful discernment, that I have made every possible inquiry about that girl, and cannot even trace her; so that no one, you know, could expect me to countenance her. Her manners bring on my palpitations. By the way, Hope is gone to London with a patient, and I trust they will not return while he is away—the palpitations, I mean, you know. Miss Maxwell has gone up to town with him. Between you and me, I think that is a case; only Dyce Pouncefort has a better chance with the old people, you know. He has been always in love with her.'

The General looked sharply at Elinor, who had taken up some work, and merely said,—

'Really! I wonder where my father can be?'

'That reminds me,' continued he, 'that I must take advantage of this chance before he comes in, you know. I trust you acknowledge that it is not my fault that Sir Gilbert resists all my overtures, and—excuse me if I speak too freely—insults me by keeping that girl here.

'My father acts according to his sense of honour and friendship,' said Elinor haughtily.

'You are right to defend him, but you cannot tell how his exasperating manner affects my sensitive temperament. He is as obstinate as his father and grandfather; and although I am by nature a yielding person—most yielding, you know—that is to say, firm as a rock in action, but easily managed in private life—you understand?'

He paused and looked at Elinor, who, seeing that a comment was expected, bowed stiffly.

'Were I happy enough to be married, my wife would have perfect ascendency over me,' he continued.

'How long my father is! I fear they must have omitted to tell him. I will ring,' interposed Elinor, rising.

The General rose also, and, placing his hand gallantly on her arm, begged her to allow him the pleasure of a continued *tête à tête.* Elinor reseated herself unwillingly.

'It is refreshing to meet a young lady whose grace and modesty are only equalled by her taste and judgment, you know—particularly in an age justly called "fast," when girls talk one to death, and make love to one in—in a very unceremonious manner, you know.'

'We have been so long abroad that I always feel old-fashioned or foreign in English society,' remarked Elinor.

'So much the better, for a fellow doesn't like to be proposed to—and now-a-days the ladies do that sort of thing, you know. In your case one is not afraid of being proposed to, but of proposing and being refused.'

'You are too flattering,' said Elinor, dreading what might come next. 'Have you read this?—Tennyson's last book?'

'I seldom read poetry—it affects my nerves; but I will make a point of reading it, if you recommend it, you know. As I was saying, when your modesty turned the subject, I have been long wishing for an opportunity of seeing you alone, for hitherto our meetings have been in the presence of others. Septimus Hope has been necessary to me during the last year or so, but I am thankful to be able to do without him now—though he is amiability itself, and never, as you must acknowledge, *de trop*—indeed, will always be much with me, unless you disapprove, Miss Oreburn.'

'I!' ejaculated Elinor, meeting the General's admiring glance. 'What can my approval or disapproval have to do with Dr. Hope?'

'Much, I trust; for he and I are in your hands—I mean, he as—as—belonging to me, as physician, man of business, friend, and so forth. As I was saying, *I* am wholly at your disposal, for you are the only young lady I have ever truly admired, since—since—you know.'

The General paused, thinking that it might not be favourable to his cause to add, 'since your own mother.'

'Will you excuse me, General Arlington? I think I hear my father,' said Elinor, once more attempting to rise.

'You must hear me out,' said the General, with more resolution than he had yet displayed. 'You have much in your power—almost everything, as regards the future of your family, you know, as well as mine. I am not quite a young man, but I flatter myself I have much to offer that younger men have not; and with it I have a heart, Miss Oreburn—or rather I had one, you know, for it is now in your possession. As I was saying, I love you, and I propose to make you my wife.'

General Arlington grew confused, rose, and approached Elinor, who drew closer to the table.

'Impossible! you cannot be serious,' she said.

'And why not? I see no reason why it should not be; indeed, it seems to me desirable for us all.'

He sat down close to Elinor.

'I have wealth, position, influence, and you have everything that a woman should have!'

Elinor was silent, not from uncertainty, but fear. How could she refuse this man and not ruin her father?

The General pleaded on for a few moments.

'I cannot marry,' she said at last 'I am needed here.'

'You would not be needed if Sir Gilbert and I came to an arrangement. We should be friends, and our interests identical, under happier circumstances, you know; and my feelings towards him would become filial, so that there need be no further perplexities. The Court and Manor would be again united, and, as I was saying,—why—it would be to our mutual interest to send that dreadful girl to school.'

Elinor glanced at her *filial* General, and withdrew her chair.

'I do not think I shall ever marry, General Arlington. I am necessary to my father and sister; and, as regards Fay, we could never send her away, unless she wished it.'

She longed to look him boldly in the face and say, as Fay would have done, 'I hate you,' but she temporised instead.

'All young ladies say something of this sort,' said the General blandly, twirling his moustache. 'I admire you all the more for your charming modesty. Perhaps you will take time to consider. I may be premature, and you are taken by surprise, although most of the young ladies of my acquaintance would not have considered me so, you know; and, indeed, I am rather astonished, under our mutual relations, that you *should* hesitate. So excellent a daughter would naturally consider her father as well as herself.'

Still the General twirled his moustache, as he sat sideways, cross-legged, with one elbow on the table, considering Elinor, who was now almost opposite him. He could not read her face, for it was bent low.

'In no case could I be bartered for,' she said at last.

'All the barter I ask is love for love,' he replied, with a touch of feeling that smote Elinor, as reality always affects a truthful nature. 'I entreat you not to decide hastily, because much hangs on your decision, and I cannot conceal from you or myself that it must influence me in my future conduct.'

'I do not see how my decision should do this. If my home duties prevent my even thinking of marriage, and if my father and sister are more than all the world besides to me, there need be no alteration in your conduct.'

'If your father and sister were more than all the world to you, you would certainly think of marriage and of me, you know.'

General Arlington said this with dogged decision.

'Surely this is ungenerous,' said Elinor, still avoiding his eye. 'I am not ungrateful for your proposal, but you must understand me.'

'Perhaps your affections are already given, and you are engaged to another?' said he hastily.

'I am not engaged to any one.'

'Then you can conscientiously accept my offer, and believe that it will be best for you and yours; and I could almost--but this I cannot promise—indeed, I might be able—but it is contrary to my reason—still, on your account, though it goes against all my prejudices, only love is supreme, you know, and I do love you, Elinor—I might be induced even to countenance *that girl*.'

Elinor saw that the General was in earnest, and her trouble increased. She must risk all, and refuse him at once; but should she by so doing draw his meshes more closely round her father? It seemed to her at the moment that home, Aimée's life, and Fay's respectability, hung by the frail thread of her 'yes' or 'no.'

'This is so unexpected, General Arlington, and I am so unused to such proposals, that I can only repeat that I have no wish to marry,' she said.

'Charming! — natural! — unsophisticated! Think of me constantly, and perhaps the wish may arise. I will take no proceedings, you know, while you are undecided. I came here this morning with a view to seeing Sir Gilbert, and talking our mutual affairs over quietly, if he can talk quietly on business—for you must allow it is not his *forte*. I wished to tell him that the presence of that girl interfered with—with our mutual relations, you know, and to beg him as a friend—a friend, you understand, Miss Oreburn—to send her away. I believe Septimus Hope assured him that I would pay for her education, and that is more than he could expect, considering the expense and annoyance her reputed father has been to me. As I was saying, it really is hard that, now he has been graciously removed, this girl should carry on the torment; and Sir Gilbert, of all men, who is indebted to our family for—for—you know.'

'Mr. Butterfield says for mortgages at high interest, for which he certainly *should* be grateful,' said Elinor, with a touch of her father's sarcasm.

'Pray don't mention it, Miss Oreburn; though, as you say, some gratitude is due for preserving the Court to Sir Gilbert. But your sense will perceive that a man can't be patient for ever, and I am sorry to say certain things irritate me past endurance. Any matters connected with the ladies, you know, and Sir Gilbert has pertinaciously interfered with me in the most tender relations; and now he brings this girl to annoy me.'

'She need not annoy you, General Arlington. I will do my best to conceal her connection with you.'

'But Sir Gilbert expects me to acknowledge her as my lawful niece, you know. As I was saying, you are the only person in the world who could smooth our disagreements. If you will accept my proposal, you know, all will be well. I could even pardon Sir Gilbert and the girl. I would give you a month—two—even three to consider, and stay my—or rather Septimus's—or rather—but I will proceed no further in business matters till you have made up your mind. We must have a settlement sooner or later, and if only it might be made on *you*, all would be well. But if you decline my offer, I can delay no longer, you know.'

Elinor's proud head resumed its place at last, and she looked him in the face. The glance she met frightened her, and she turned her own flushed, angry face towards the window as she said,—

'My father would consent to no such compromise, nor could I.'

Outside the window stood Fay, grimacing and making imaginary passes at her uncle's back. She nodded to Elinor, and disappeared.

'You misunderstand me. I would not offend you for the world,' said General Arlington, eager to retrieve his false step; for he was unquestionably in love, and an old man's love, if it burns slowly, burns brightly.

The door opened, and in walked Fay. Elinor was astonished, but relieved; the General angered, but silenced. The unabashed Fay stalked up to Elinor's side, and confronted her uncle. A hat, much on one side, surmounted her black locks, and she held a large branch of apple-blossoms, which trailed on the ground.

'Saar Gilbert makes his compliments and excuses, General Arlington. He is helping build his farm, and much engaged,' she said.

Two pairs of eyes met—one small, fierce, indignant; the other large, luminous, resolute. The General rose and turned to Elinor.

'My compliments to your father. I will call again. Think over what we have been saying.'

He wrung her hand, scowled at Fay, and hurried from the room. Fay ran to the bell, and rang a peal that resounded through the house.

'He will think it is the old gentleman, and come no more,' she cried. 'What has he been saying to you? I saw you angry, and your face red as the fire, and improvised the message, for I met Saar Gilbert.'

'Oh, Fay, why did you tell a falsehood?' said Elinor, suppressing some unaccountable emotion.

'He merits not the truth, the *vaurien!* There are tears in your eyes, Mees. He has been talking of me and troubled you. I tell Saar Gilbert.'

'It was not of you, Fay. Pray do not say anything to my father,' said Elinor, her tears falling slowly.

She sat down, and Fay knelt by her side, taking both her hands.

'They are cold as my frog's back, Elinor *chérie.* I never saw thee weep before. Confide in me. Thou wilt not? Then I find out thy grief and punish that man.'

She put her arms round Elinor, whose fair head rested a few moments on hers. Elinor was overpowered by the uncertain prospect opened to her by the General's declaration, and sobbed.

'I will change my mind and make the old *scélérat* educate me!' cried Fay. 'He is still here, for his carriage has not appeared. I go in search.'

'Pray be quiet, Fay. You will do only harm,' said Elinor.

But Fay was in the hall. She was, however, back again instantly, with the intelligence that she heard voices in the library; that Sir Gilbert had come in, and that the General's carriage was at the door.

'He shall never again torment you on my account, I swear!' she cried. 'I will present myself to him and Saar Gilbert.'

'Fay, Fay, you cannot tell what mischief you may do,' sobbed Elinor; but Fay was not to be controlled.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WORD RUIN.

SIR GILBERT and General Arlington were *tête-à-tête* at last—the one cool and *nonchalant*, the other hot and excited. They were seated in two old-fashioned easy-chairs opposite one another—Sir Gilbert reclining and twirling his favourite implement, a paper-knife; the General bolt upright, agitating his hat and cane.

'I have told your daughter, and repeat to you, that I have no objection to send the girl to school, provided I am not expected to acknowledge her,' said the General.

'I scarcely understand your position. The fact of your educating her is a virtual acknowledgment. You do not deny that she is George's child?'

'I neither deny nor admit it; but I could not receive her as my niece. Indeed, I positively decline.'

'May I ask your intentions concerning her? You see I am, at present, a poor substitute for her dead father, and profess a certain amount of interest. That word recalls my ever-increasing debts to you, General. Butterfield duns me with interest and compound interest until I am quite overwhelmed.'

'Your own *interest* would induce you to meet my views with regard to the girl, I should think.'

'Ah, to be sure. What *are* your views—your intentions?—as I put it *en père*.'

'Listen, Sir Gilbert: I am willing to apprentice the girl to a school, or music-master, or stage-player, or what you will. She would act or sing, I should think. I will pay a premium with her, on condition that I am rid of her, and that she never darkens this country again, you know.'

'Too generous—you surpass yourself. May I ask what amount of —say compound interest—you will pay to mortgage her to this school-mistress or theatre?'

'I would sacrifice a hundred or so; and I assure you I want ready money, Sir Gilbert.'

'Alas! so do I. I find it of all things the least ready. You think your niece—I beg your pardon—your brother's daughter—worth a hundred or so? I now understand the conditions. To what school do you propose to send her?'

'Perhaps you or Miss Oreburn would manage that. I know nothing of schools.'

'We are precisely in the same predicament. Having lived so long abroad, we are acquainted with no school but Mr. Tenderton's; would that suit your views.'

'Are you laughing at me, Sir Gilbert?'

'By no means, General. I am endeavouring to master the depths of your understanding. We appear to be so impoverished—you and I—that anything beyond a national establishment is out of the question.'

General Arlington grew redder and redder, and struck his cane on the carpet. But a vision of Elinor restrained his impatience.

'It is impossible to negotiate with you, Sir Gilbert. Your daughter would understand and appreciate my proposal. She has common sense, if no one else has.'

'True, General. To her management we owe the delightful privilege of living as paupers under our own—or your roof-tree—which is it? To her we are indebted thus far for the very desultory education of your niece—again ten thousand pardons!—your brother's child. And to her we are apparently to be grateful for your good opinion. Let us understand one another. You must remember that George and I were playmates and schoolfellows, and, in spite of his escapades, I loved him. When I rashly promised to see after his child, the old affection returned with personal contact; for one may ignore a distant or dead brother, but not a living, present friend. Still he leaves the child to your care, not mine; and I am anxious to fulfil his wishes, having a certain weak superstition concerning the sacred nature of a dying man's request.'

Sir Gilbert paused, and quietly placed his glass in his eye.

'You are at liberty to ruin yourself and your family, Sir Gilbert Oreburn, but, by Jove! you shall never again get the better of me. If you choose to refuse my offer, and to burden yourself with this gipsy brat, do so; but I will not have my existence shortened by a furious beggar, because you think proper to take her in. Excuse me if I am excited. These conversations bring on my attacks—and—and—Dr. Hope is in London!'

A sudden fear stayed the General's wrath. He believed that undue excitement might kill him.

'Everything is done by advertisement now-a-days,' resumed Sir Gilbert. 'We will advertise for the required scholastic establishment—advertise for her French friends. We will insert a whole column to the effect that ladies engaged in tuition, and people acquainted with Monsieur de Saint Ange, will hear of something to their advantage by applying to So and So. I wonder if any one could be found who would consider Fay to be advantageous? But the hundred pounds, General! Our letter-bags would not hold the answers.'

General Arlington was calming himself; that is to say, he was sitting with his hand on his pulse, his eyes on the door, and thinking of Elinor.

'Yes—yes, advertise—very good,' he muttered, under his breath, unconscious of Sir Gilbert's irony.

The door-handle turned, and the words, 'Fay, Fay, come back, reached Sir Gilbert in Elinor's voice.

'Not at all, Mees Oreburn. I am resolved,' was the reply, and Fay entered the room sedately, and marched up to Sir Gilbert's side, thus facing her uncle.

'She is not amiss, General!' said Sir Gilbert, smiling at the girl's effrontery. 'What brings you here, Mademoiselle?'

'I have changed my mind, Saar Gilbert,' she began, in French. 'I mean to make *that man* pay for my education, until I become accomplished as Mesdemoiselles your daughters.'

'Tell him so, Fay.'

She fixed her eyes on General Arlington, threw back her long hair, and, moving her hands dramatically, said rapidly, in a clear, ringing voice,—

'Monsieur, I have changed my mind. I accept your polite proposal to make of me a *demoiselle accomplie*, and I go to the *pension* you shall propose. I learn all the languages, all the instruments,—of which I prefer the violin; I study the grammars and the histories, which I hate; I pursue the studies Mees Oreburn fails to implant. I support myself. Monsieur, your Dr. Hope say that you will make of me a governess. I consent. You will then no longer persecute Mees Oreburn on my account.'

'Fay! Fay!' groaned Elinor from the hall.

'I take care not to offend the old owl!' cried Fay, in French; turning towards the door.

The General looked savagely at her, and replied,—

'I repeat my offer, Mademoiselle. I will pay for your education, provided you are at a distance, and never appear to disgrace me again.'

'I desire no more to see you, Monsieur; you are not so agreeable. I spend my holidays here, is it not, Saar Gilbert?'

'Assuredly; if the authorities will permit,' said Sir Gilbert.

'My offer is made on condition that you never again return to this neighbourhood, and claim no connection with me,' said the irritated General.

'It is certain that I return here, Monsieur, unless Saar Gilbert shut the door in my nose; but I promise, on the honour of the Saint Anges, that I never claim to be your niece.'

'Hush, Fay!' interrupted Sir Gilbert. 'You must not make that promise, for remember you are your father's daughter, and this gentleman is his brother.'

Fay looked from one to the other, her large eyes flashing.

'I must promise, I must not promise—which is it? Monsieur, I desire not to be your niece. I am of the Saint Anges—they are noble. My dear father was also of the Saint Anges.'

'Assuredly you have no right to the name of Arlington, and shall never dare to use it!' said the General doggedly.

'That question is not yet settled, General; and we have still the advertisement sheet,' said Sir Gilbert.

'It would scarcely be to her credit or mine to send her into the world as my brother's ——!' shouted the General.

'Still less would it be to the credit of Mademoiselle de Saint Ange to be supported by General Arlington, unless as his acknowledged relation,' retorted Sir Gilbert.

'*Ma foi*, it is difficult—worse than Mees Oreburn's instructions, for I comprehend them a little, but I comprehend you not at all,' said Fay, moving her hands from one to the other. 'I desire to be accomplished, and maintain myself, so I yield to the amiable offer of Monsieur—I become wise, and humiliate myself, and behold! it is of no use.'

'I hold to my promise on the conditions I have named. On no other will I spend another penny. My brother brought shame enough upon us—I will submit to no more. And by heavens! Sir Gilbert, if you persist, I will forelose.'

The General rose in his excitement, and clenched his fist in the air.

'I never persist, General—it is too fatiguing,' said Sir Gilbert carelessly. 'But I always protect and honour the so-called weaker sex, when the effort is not too excessive; and this young lady comes under that denomination—is it not, Fay?'

'He says my father brought shame on him!' cried Fay, looking anything but weak, and casting fierce glances on her uncle. 'He lies, Saar Gilbert!—he is wicked!—he is poltroon!—he speaks evil of his brother! I wash my hands of him, and become not accomplished. I pour my maledictions on him!—I hate him! Oh, *mon père, mon père!*'

Fay waved her arms towards the excited General, then burst into an agony of passionate tears. Elinor, who had been anxiously awaiting the result of this interview, heard, and came in. She spoke to Fay in French.

'Go, I entreat you—to Aimée, anywhere, but pray do not irritate him further.' Then to the General, 'You will excuse her, General Arlington, for she knows no better.'

The appearance of Elinor calmed the General as by magic. Sir Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and whispered to Fay, '*Le jeu ne vaut pas la chandelle.* The old beau is not worth so much fire and salt water. I thought you infinitely more magnificent.'

'Pardon me, Saar Gilbert—I recover myself entirely,' said Fay; and with a sudden effort she stayed her sobs, and again fixed her now tearful eyes on her uncle, who, fortunately, was looking at Elinor.

'You know, Miss Oreburn,' he said in a low voice, 'that you have everything in your power. You command, and I obey.'

Poor Elinor bent slightly, and went towards Fay.

'You will come with me,' she said decidedly, taking her hand, which, however, she snatched away.

'Not the trouble, Mademoiselle—I go alone. Monsieur, I wish you the good morning, and return you a thousand thanks on the part of my dear father and myself for your obliging offer, which Saar Gilbert will accept or decline. Is it not, Saar Gilbert?'

Fay curtseyed to the ground as a Frenchwoman alone can, her marvellous hair falling like a drapery about her, rose, turned, and stalked majestically to the door.

'Bravo, Fay!' said Sir Gilbert, rising involuntarily and opening it. 'You deserve a shower of bouquets.'

'What a girl!—unquestionably Egyptian,' said the General, drawing a long breath and turning to Elinor.

'Saar Gilbert, *de grâce un instant!*' cried Fay, glancing back from the hall with an entreating gesture.

He went to her.

'I do as you wish, but let him not torment Mees Oreburn,' she said. 'The old villain will murder us. Let him take care, or I murder him first. Send me back to France—banish me—but oh, commit me not to him!'

'Do not be afraid—he is not overpoweringly anxious,' laughed Sir Gilbert.

'Ha, ha! *ma foi*, *non*, he loves me not,' said Fay, laughing also. 'Go! go!—leave him not with Mees Oreburn.'

Sir Gilbert returned to the library, and Fay ran wildly up-stairs, hurried down the east wing, and rang the bells in several of the bedrooms.

'Stokes says he is frightened to death if they ring,' she muttered, as she vanished down the passage leading to the other part of the house.

'Dear father, General Arlington has promised to reconsider his resolution concerning Fay,' said Elinor, as Sir Gllbert entered the room.

'She has been already long enough under consideration,' said Sir Gilbert. 'She is almost a woman, and will soon assert herself; until then she had better remain here.'

'On no account!—on no account!' cried the General.

'You kindly promised to consider, and let me know,' said Elinor, glancing appealingly from one to the other.

'In a few days, then,' said the General, with a look at Elinor that she could not misunderstand. 'I believe my carriage is waiting.'

Fay's bells rang as the General was holding Elinor's hand. He started as he pressed it hard, and hastened to his carriage. As he got in he muttered,—

'If it were not for that charming girl, I would ruin them all tomorrow. He insults me, but not with impunity, I can tell him—not with impunity.'

Sir Gilbert and Elinor summoned Stokes, who knew nothing of the bells, but asserted that 'the old gen'leman hated the General, and ring he would whenever he was in the library, as was the Old Gen'leman's partickelar apartment.'

They went in search of Fay, and found her with Aimée, seated at her feet, detailing her interview with her uncle. Fortunately Aimée had not noticed the bells. Sir Gilbert stood a moment to consider the picture presented by the two girls. Aimée looked like the quiet, gilded dawn—fair, pale, transparent; Fay like the dark, troubled night—beautiful, with moon and stars. A word—a touch—of the one could calm the other, and Fay's black, liquid eyes cleared and softened beneath the serene blue depths of Aimée's. Sir Gilbert trembled as he thought that the future of these two lay in the power of such a man as General Arlington. Yet Sir Gilbert's was not a nature either to dread or realise the word Ruin.

CHAPTER XXI.

FAY MEETS HER FIANCÉ.

'MONSIEUR VILLY! Monsieur Villy! you do not know me. I am Fay, your *fiancée*.'

These words sounded through the woods. Fay had come to the Fairy Well to fetch water for Aimée, and had seen William Maxwell vanishing in the distance. Fay's pitcher dropped in her eagerness, and William's gun was displaced as he turned and met her.

'Ah, Monsieur Villy, you forget your *fiancée*, who forgets you never. My Villy and I—we talk of you all day. Your namesake is a big black cat, who loves nobody but me. Where have you been so long? You have not written to me, and I have written you thousands of letters.'

'But I never received them.'

'No—Mees Oreburn would not send them; but I have them all for you. Where have you been?'

'Hard at work in London and abroad. How are Sir Gilbert and Miss Oreburn?'

'Saar Gilbert, he is just so well and so *taquin* as ever. Mees Oreburn—why do you ask for Mees Oreburn?'

'Because I wish to know how she is.'

'So! is that all? She is *triste*. I will tell you because you are my *fiancé*. You remember, is it not?'

'I cannot forget that you honoured me by that title. Why is Miss Oreburn *triste?*'

'*That man* has tormented her.'

'What man?'

'The little villain of a General. *Entre nous*, I think he desires to marry her and murder me. But you say it not again. I tell you because you are my *fiancé*, and will help us.'

'How, Mademoiselle?'

'You call me Mees. My name is Fay—Félicité Gabrielle de Saint Ange. But I confide to you a secret, for you are of the law, and will help me. My father—but first you must swear not to tell. You will keep my secret?'

'Yes.'

'You smile as if it were a *secret de Polichinelle*, but it is not. They all quarrel for me—they tear one another's eyes out, they murder, because my father was General Arlington's brother.'

As Fay said this, she drew close to Maxwell and whispered.

He had shrewdly suspected a secret connected with her, but not exactly this. He felt that he had no right to know it, and at once tried to divert her from it, by remarking that she was much grown.

'So said Monsieur le Docteur to Arbitère. I heard him through the door. "That child looks like a woman, and is ugly as sin," he remarked. 'Am I so ugly, Monsieur Villy?'

'I will tell you in two or three years.'

'That is all the same to me. I will be clever, and put those men to shame. I will find my relations. *Ma foi*, will you come with me to France in search of them?

'What would Mrs. Grundy say?'

'Who is she?'

'A lady who looks after our morals.'

'Then I wish not her acquaintance. Mees Aimée is my moralist, and, *ma foi*, she is a saint, and would make me one also, but—say it not, Monsieur Villy—I have a bad spirit within me, that hinders me to be good. Then the little knave of a General, I hate him always, and Aimée tells me to love my enemies. So does good Mr. Tenderton in his sermons, till I am *ennuyée* to the death.'

'I agree with them. Hatred is a very useless passion. Cannot you propitiate the General? It is better to be friends than enemies with our relations.'

'Then why are not you and Saar Gilbert friends?'

'We are acquaintances.'

'Why come not you to the Court, and good Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny? When I see them, I ask them, and they look *farouche*. You tell me to be wise, and are not wise yourself. I see no one wise but Elinor. Even Aimée likes to be ill, because Monsieur le Docteur comes to see her, and she takes his medicines when she will not taste Arbitère's jellies. You should see *le coquin* move his hands to make her sleep, and then cause her to start with the shock of his battery. He electrify me von day, and I scream, and nearly jump through the window.'

'Are you going to Miss Whiston's croquet-party, or is Sir Gilbert or Miss Oreburn?' asked Maxwell, not wishing to hear the secrets of Aimée's confessional.

'They say I am too young for parties, but I play croquet, and they all wish me for *parténaire*. If you go, Monsieur Villy, I will peep to see you play.'

'I hate croquet, Fay. It is a game for fashionable vagabonds who have nothing else to do.'

'Perhaps you play it not well? If you did, you would adore it.'

'I believe you have hit the right nail, Mademoiselle. But I am detaining you. Good morning.'

'Still one moment. You will come again to-morrow, and I bring you more news of *that man.* Ah, he must not take Mees Oreburn from Mr. Dyze, is it? Why do you blush, Monsieur Villy? *Hein!* Now you smile, and I adore you. When you are grave your face is long—long as—Arbitère's. Is it so when you make the law? And do you wear a big wig like Judge Gascoigne in the English History?'

'I shall wear one when I make the law.'

'Shall I tell Mees Oreburn that you are going to Mees Whiston's?'

'If you like.'

'*Bien.* And I shall say that you love your *fiancée*, who loves you?'

'Yes, if you think proper.'

'And that you care not for Mees Oreburn, but that you help me to torment the General?'

'That is quite unnecessary.'

Fay examined Maxwell's face inquisitively a moment, then, snatching up her broken pitcher, made him a curtsey, and began a sort of dancing retreat backwards, singing as she moved. He gazed after the strange, wayward girl, and wondered who and what she was. But her words annoyed him, for she was improvising a song at the top of her splendid voice concerning what she should say to Elinor. He followed her a few paces, and she paused.

'You will not say anything foolish to Miss Oreburn?' he said.

'*Ma foi*, *non.* You are both too grave. I shall only say that Monsieur and Madame Moneypenny, and their nephew, Monsieur Villy, *mon fiancé*, are going to Miss Whiston's, and then Saar Gilbert will not let Mees Oreburn go.'

Maxwell frowned, but abstained from comment.

'You shall go yourself, Monsieur Villy?'

'I do not know, but certainly not if my presence prevent Miss Oreburn's.'

'I will tell her. She will not want you, for she will have Monsieur Dyze, and all the rest. Shall you send to her a message?'

'No—yes—you might say that my aunt was regretting yesterday that she looked ill.'

'That is not agreeable. I shall say, "Mees Oreburn, Monsieur Villy presents his compliments, and his aunt does you the honour of speaking to him of you." She remark, "My niece is a pretty young lady, with the eyes blue;" he reply, "Yes, but I admire Fay with the eyes black."'

'That would not be true.'

'*Impoli!* and I break my pitcher to catch you, and offend Stokes, who will puff out her cheeks so, whistle, and say, "Well, Ma'mselle, I wonder at you. Saar Gilbert can't afford to buy pitchers for the likes o' you, he can't." Then she will give me *confitures*. Now listen, Monsieur Villy, while I sing to you the song I shall sing Mees Oreburn—

> "Il aime les yeux noirs, non pas les yeux bleus,
> Il aime beaucoup Fay, et Mees Oreburn un peu."'

Maxwell felt inclined to exclaim, 'Witch! enchantress!' as Fay sang this impromptu stanza, and the woods re-echoed to her splendid soprano. She curtseyed again, waved her arms, laughed, kissed her hand, turned and vanished through the trees and underwood. He watched her till she disappeared, her long hair waving as she danced along, and some sort of flower hanging from her disordered hat. He thought of the tale she had told him, and understood, in part, her position – thought he understood why she was still called Mademoiselle Fay, and unacknowledged by the General.

While he was pondering this, and the rest of Fay's not very acceptable intelligence, she hastened back to Elinor, and greeted her with the stanza she had composed. Having succeeded in rousing her friend's curiosity, she set her to guess whom she had met.

'*Non*. It is not Napoléon le Petit—not your Dyze—ha, ha! I thought you would guess him—not the little *scélérat* of a General, nor the amiable docteur. Guess again. Wrong. Not good Mr. Tenderton or the millionaire. *Ma foi*, you will not guess. It is Monsieur Villy, *mon fiancé*. Why do you blush, Mees? He loves me always, and we are engaged. We shall marry, and have reunions, cards, and spectacles. Listen before you make me the sermon. I told him of the little villain of a General, and he will put on his big wig, and help to find my *parens*; and I told him that you had scores of lovers—Monsieur Dyze, and'—

Elinor blushed in earnest, and interrupted her with a loud and imperative 'Fay, how dare you?'

'What is the matter, Mees? I only tell the truth, and I like the peoples to know you will not marry the villain General.'

'Fay, you will be our destruction and your own, if you cannot hold your tongue. What right have you to speak of me? How can you know anything of lovers—you, a child?'

'Ah, but it is all natural. I must tell my *fiancé*, is it not, like the wives the husbands? I read of it with Aimée in the Testament.'

'It is too bad—too annoying!' exclaimed Elinor.

'Ah, pardon, Elinor, *ma mie*; you can say so to him at Mees Whiston's, if he is there. Perhaps he goes—perhaps he does not go. *Ma foi*, the men are strange, and he said he would not go if his presence prevented you.'

Elinor had seen Maxwell occasionally since their chance acquaintance. She scarcely knew how much she liked him, or, indeed, whether she liked him at all ; still she suddenly became anxious to go to Miss Whiston's croquet-party, inferring from Fay's malicious words that he might be there.

She went, accordingly, chaperoned by Mrs. Tenderton—for Sir Gilbert had declined. Miss Whiston had prevailed on Mrs. Moneypenny to accept when Sir Gilbert had refused ; and she and Maxwell were among the many anxiously looking out for Elinor when she arrived. She was much admired, and neither paucity of money nor plenitude of debts hindered her being the best-born and best-bred girl in the neighbourhood.

Mrs. Moneypenny was standing irresolute when Elinor perceived her, and, following a natural impulse, went to her and greeted her almost affectionately.

'I am so glad to see you again,' she said, her colour coming as Maxwell approached.

'I am sure, so am I,' said Mrs. Moneypenny, 'and so is Willie. We often talk of you.'

Maxwell and Elinor shook hands, and then Dyce Pouncefort hurried them off to join the croquet, managing to secure Elinor on his side, while Maxwell was opposed to them.

It was a bright day and a bright scene. All the world was there in fashionable costume, and the lawn looked like a large garden of many-coloured flowers. Elinor was momentarily happy. So was Maxwell, for he managed to be near her, and to help her ball through a hoop, which he had no right to do. This called down a violent remonstrance from Mr. Napoleon Hope, who was the champion croquetter of the county.

Elinor's brief happiness was interrupted by General Arlington. She saw him at a distance—saw him come towards her; and she cast such a terrified glance at Maxwell that he remained at her side. The General's manner was so eager that it could not be misunderstood. He said that he hated croquet-parties as a rule, but could not resist Miss Whiston's, and seemed to take possession of Elinor, as if she belonged to him. As the game continued, he followed her, thereby occasionally impeding it, and causing Napoleon Hope to vituperate, and say, 'The old fellow hops about like a parched pea.'

When Napoleon Hope and his side had brought the game to a successful conclusion, Maxwell offered his arm to Elinor. She accepted it thankfully. He took her, at her request, to Mrs. Tenderton, and she sheltered herself between that lady and Mrs. Moneypenny. But her tormentor was soon at the back of her chair. Maxwell went off in search of tea, and the General asked Elinor if she had seen Miss Whiston's rhododendrons. She had not seen them, and he begged to be allowed to show them to her after she had finished tea. She was about to decline, but he whispered so emphatically to her that he must speak to her alone, that she dared not refuse.

CHAPTER XXII.

'ADIEU, MON FIANCÉ!—AU REVOIR!'

MISS WHISTON'S rhododendrons were celebrated for their beauty, size, and profusion. When the General and Elinor reached them, the latter began to express her admiration; but she soon found that the General had come to admire, not them, but her. He had not been at the Court since his proposal, and she had purposely avoided going where she might meet him. He never went to croquet-parties, therefore she had imagined herself safe on the present occasion; but he accepted Miss Whiston's invitation on the chance of meeting her. When he had assured himself that they were alone, he began the subject uppermost in his mind.

'I have been doing my best to meet you ever since our last interview,' he said. 'I wished to see you again before I wrote to Sir Gilbert, because I could not quite ascertain the state of your feelings, you know. I should have called on you, but what between your father's aggravating manner, that exasperating young fury, and those intolerable bells, I never approach the Court without a palpitation; and that is dangerous, highly dangerous, you know, dear Miss Oreburn.'

He paused and looked at Elinor, who was half hidden by a rhododendron bush. She made an attempt to speak, but he forestalled her.

'You have now had some time to consider my proposal,' he continued, 'and I assure you I have thought of little else. I have quite lost my appetite, and forget to take my tonic; for anxiety kills one, you know. Indeed, dear Miss Oreburn, you have absolute power over me, and you have only to say one word to command, not only my destiny, but that furious girl's.'

He paused again, and this time seemed to expect a reply.

'I should be sorry to have power over any one's destiny,' remarked Elinor.

'You are all-powerful, you know,' returned he, trying to see her face, hidden by the flowers behind which she sheltered. 'I seize this opportunity to renew my proposal, and only await your permission and decision to write to Sir Gilbert.'

'I have decided,' said Elinor slowly.

General Arlington drew nearer to her, but she shrank farther back amongst the bushes.

'You are right—always right,' he observed, love in his glance and admiration in his voice. 'Thank you very much for deciding, for it takes quite a load off me. You shall do what you like with that child, you know, and other matters will fall in naturally. Dear Miss Oreburn, your word will be law!'

He was now quite close to her in spite of obstructing bushes, but she managed once more to interpose a branch of rhododendrons. She turned pale, and felt as if she must literally fall under the weight of responsibility thrust upon her. But she made a great effort, and said, as calmly as she could, dragging her words out one by one,—

'You mistake, General Arlington. I—have—decided—not'—

'Stop, for Heaven's sake!' he interrupted. 'Don't say not to have me, or, by Jove!'—he paused, and fixed his eyes on the spot where her face was nearly hidden—'I'll ruin you all! Listen. If you marry me I will not foreclose, and I'll acknowledge the girl, though I hate her. If not'—

'Do not tempt me so. It is cruel, ungenerous!' exclaimed Elinor, facing him. 'I have resolved never to marry.'

'Has your father compelled you to say this?'

'No, no. I have not told him. I should not dare.'

'You love another? Dyce Pouncefort — Septimus Hope—that puppy Maxwell—somebody abroad?'

Elinor shook her head.

'Then I will not give you up. The time will come when you will be thankful for my love, and return it.'

'Never! It cannot be—indeed it cannot be!'

'But I can wait, you know.'

'For what, General Arlington?'

'Your consent. You will soon understand how entirely your father is in my power, and how, if you keep that girl, and persist in refusing me, I can ruin you all.'

'Hush, for pity's sake!' cried Elinor, starting forward, and clasping his arm.

He seized her hand, and clenched it so tightly that she could not withdraw it.

'I will give you a year, two years, three, if you will; but I will never give you up, or see you married to another.'

'I said I did not mean to marry. Release my hand, for you hurt me,' said Elinor.

'Hurt you!' he muttered, letting go her hand. 'I would save you. Will you swear that you will not marry any one but me?'

'I cannot swear.'

'Will you promise? If, when I ask you again, you consent, all shall be well. Meanwhile, I must be assured that, if you do not marry me, you will marry no one else while I live. Will you promise that?' He spoke with a dogged resolution that terrified Elinor. His face was stern, his manner decided.

'If I say I never mean to marry, is not that enough?' said Elinor. 'Why extract a promise? If I promise, will you also promise not to molest my father?'

'I will leave Sir Gilbert in possession of the Court so long as I may hope to win your love and hand, and provided you promise to marry no other while I live. By heavens! I will not be superseded again!'

'I promise anything to save my father—but oh, do not persecute me! I can never, never marry you!'

Elinor repented her decisive words as soon as she had said them. General Arlington uttered a startling oath, and vowed that if she did not unsay them, he would no longer delay the course hitherto avoided on her account. She clasped her hands despairingly, she appealed to his feelings, she urged her youth—in vain. Selfish people can be hard as iron.

'You or the Court,' he muttered savagely. 'I will not be circumvented again. I hold you to your promise, and will keep mine as long as you do not decidedly reject me. I give you two years.'

'Two years!' echoed Elinor. 'What then?'

'I will ask you again, and meanwhile will be as devoted to you as heretofore, and leave your father the Court, which is virtually mine. You promise?'

'What?' said Elinor, trying to gain time.

'To consider my proposal, and my love, and to marry no one but me.'

Elinor's head drooped over the branch of blossom on which her hand rested. A prayer for guidance arose in her heart as she thought of her father, brother, Aimée, Fay—all, apparently, dependent on her Yes or No. As she paused, the General tempted again.

'You can save them all. Be mine and be happy.'

Hot tears fell into the flowers. He touched her arm tenderly, while his hand shook with the effort to control a passion he had allowed to overstep his reason.

'Forgive me, for I love you,' he whispered. 'Will you try to love me?'

'I will try—I will promise—in two years,' said Elinor, scarcely knowing what she said.

'Enough! I will detain you no longer. I hear voices,' said he hastily, as sounds of merriment grated on poor Elinor's ear.

She did not wait for further permission, but hurried into the labyrinth of rhododendrons, closely followed by the General.

During their absence Fay had appeared on the scene. A servant had spied her peering through the evergreens, and told Miss Whiston. That lady insisted on her joining the party.

'Ma'mselle, by Jove! Now we'll challenge the world!' cried Napoleon Hope, as she appeared.

'*De grâce*, Mees Whiston, let me depart. Mees Oreburn will be angry. I am *en déshabillé.* See, my frills are torn by your holly hedge. Ha, Monsieur Villy!—there thou art!'

She was soon surrounded, for she was a general favourite; and dulness disappeared with her.

'She shall be on our side!'—'No, on ours!' was the cry.

'She and Napoleon shall not play together,' decided Miss Whiston.

'Ha, Monsieur Napoléon! I pity you to be disappointed of me. I am your *parténaire* next time. Monsieur Villy, you play? *Non!* Where is Mees Oreburn? Ha, Monsieur Dyze, what a bad hit! Bravo, red, you send white far! *Ma foi*, that is fine, Mees Whiston! I pay you off for that. Take two turn off blue, Mees Marston, and help me through. There is Monsieur Napoleon has croquetted me to the Antipodes. Now I revenge on the rogue. We shall have play.'

She followed her ball towards the quarter of the rhododendrons, and met Elinor and the General.

Elinor's face was deadly pale; the General's fierce and red.

'He has been persecuting her again. I will make him to go,' thought Fay, and planted herself in front of her uncle.

'*Bon jour, Monsieur le Général.* I hope you are in good health and amiable disposition,' she said. 'You were in bad humour the other day—so was I; but be not afraid, I will not be your niece.'

She curtseyed to the ground, while the General muttered an imprecation and turned to Elinor.

'You had better keep her out of my way, or, by—Good morning. Remember,' he said hastily, wrung Elinor's hand till she almost screamed, brushed past Fay, and hastened off.

'Orange!—where is orange?' resounded.

'*Me voici!* here I am: I go and return immediately,' cried Fay. 'He has departed, and we breathe again.'

She ran off to her game, and Maxwell came hastily to Elinor. He had been watching her, and thought she looked unnaturally pale.

'You are ill, Miss Oreburn; let me take you to the house,' he said.

'I think—I am—faint,' she replied, with difficulty.

She took his arm and tottered to the verandah, thence to the nearest room. Fortunately it was the book-room, and unoccupied. She sank down on the sofa and fainted. Maxwell deliberated an instant, then resolved to avoid disturbance on her account. The book-room communicated with the dining-room, and he went in, and returned with wine and water. Very delicately and tenderly he raised her fair head, loosened and removed her hat, and poured some down her throat. She revived instantly, and he laid her back on the sofa almost before she could be aware that he had been supporting her. When she opened her eyes, she glanced round in a sort of terror, but, seeing Maxwell, tried to rise, and asked if she had been ill.

'Only a little faint,' he said. 'Shall I fetch some one?'

'No, no—I am better. Thank you so much! How kind you are!' she said, trying to recall her senses, and holding out her hand instinctively in gratitude.

He took it, and held it awhile. As she recovered gradually, the awkwardness of her position suggested itself, and her face flushed. He let go her hand, and said quietly that he would fetch his aunt.

'I wanted to speak—to you—first,' said Elinor, with difficulty. 'You will keep Fay's secret?'

'With my life. And if I can render her or you help at any time, I will. Believe me that my knowledge of her relationship to the General was involuntary on my part.'

'I do!—I do!'

'And that I would not seek to discover secrets intentionally concealed.'

He thought of General Arlington, and glanced at Elinor, who flushed with some inward consciousness. She tried to rise, but was still too giddy to walk, and sank back again.

'It is so foolish!—so unusual! I was never faint before,' she said.

He brought her more wine, and entreated her not to be alarmed: it was the heat, the game, the folly, he remarked, scarcely knowing what he said.

While he was talking and Elinor silent, Fay appeared.

'*Bon jour, Monsieur le Général.* I hope you are in good health and amiable disposition.'—*Page* 143.

'Here you are, Mees Oreburn!—and you, Monsieur Villy! Ha, *chérie*, thou hast been ill!'

She threw herself on her knees by Elinor, and looked from her to Maxwell.

'Only a little faint,' said the latter. 'Would you mind bringing Mrs. Moneypenny here?'

Fay started up, and, putting her hand on his shoulder, said sharply,—

'Why that? Are there any secrets between you? It is I who am your *fiancée*. Mees Oreburn shall not have you, is it? It was I you saved from the lonely night, and carried to the bright Castle—I you nursed and were good to—not Elinor, is it not?'

Elinor, crimson with shame, tried to rise, and failed.

'I will go,' said William, hurrying through the window to cover Elinor's and his own distress.

'Fay, I have been ill, and you have no pity,' said Elinor.

'Ah! but yes. Did I not save thee from the General?—have I not sent Monsieur Dyze to search for thee? But thou shalt not have Monsieur Villy—*non!*'

'Why am I every one's victim?' said poor Elinor, tears filling her eyes.

Fay's arms were round her instantly.

'Ah, forgive me! but, you see, I like him all to myself,' she said, with childish *naïveté*.

Maxwell returned with Mrs. Moneypenny.

'My dear niece! Faint—ill? Take my scent-bottle—eau de cologne on one side, salts on the other. Why didn't you send for me before?'

She pushed Fay aside, sat down by Elinor, and began to bathe her forehead with eau de cologne, while she held the salts to her nose.

'Fan her, Willie. Men are utterly useless when they're wanted.'

She gave him a sumptuous fan, but a faint smile from Elinor assured him that she did not need it. Fay looked on jealously; angered that any one but herself should help Elinor, or be tended by Maxwell.

Elinor recovered, and thanked her aunt warmly, who said she only wished she could be friends with her sister's children. She kissed Elinor affectionately, who, well-nigh worn out with anxiety, was thankful for this sudden tenderness from her mother's only sister.

'You must take my arm, Elinor,' said jealous Fay, as they went through the verandah into the lawn.

The first person they saw was Sir Gilbert, who had come to fetch Elinor, contrary to his intention. He was standing near the verandah, unconscious of what was passing within the house. Perceiving Mrs. Moneypenny at her side, he hesitated. He had never before met her face to face. She backed uneasily, and seemed about to return to the house; but he raised his hat gravely, and she bent stiffly.

'Good-bye, Miss Oreburn,' she said, her kindly manner changed.

'Good-bye, aunt. Thank you,' whispered Elinor.

Mrs. Moneypenny walked towards Mrs. Tenderton, who had been watching her, and who said, 'How nice! I am so thankful. See how anxious Sir Gilbert is to be friends!'

She glanced round, and saw him surveying her through his glass. Happily she did not hear his remarks, though Mrs. Tenderton did, who joined him and Elinor.

'What an elaborate toilette! Money must be a superfluity there,' he said sarcastically.

'Oh yes, Sir Gilbert. No one dresses so well as Mrs. Moneypenny. And she is the kindest woman in the world.'

'So I could imagine. My daughter appears to think so also, she is so anxious for princely fellowship. "Still to be powdered,—still perfumed," as rare Ben Jonson hath it.'

'I assure you she uses neither rouge nor powder,' said Mrs. Tenderton.

Sir Gilbert continued to look at Mrs. Moneypenny, now standing with other spectators to watch the game. She was certainly dressed to the extreme of fashion, and shone out in a costume of mauve and white lace.

Incomparable! And you vouch for nature, Mrs. Tenderton?' interrogated Sir Gilbert. 'No manufactured hair?'

'I didn't quite say that,' said Mrs. Tenderton apologetically.

Meanwhile Dyce was at Elinor's side, inquiring where she had been so long; and Maxwell stood, irresolute, at a little distance, not liking to leave her, yet disliking to force himself on Sir Gilbert's notice.

'"Still to be neat, still to be drest,
As you were going to a feast,"'

continued Sir Gilbert. 'Ben Jonson was right, don't you think so, Dyce?'

'I never read the tiresome old fellow, Sir Gilbert. There's Maxwell knows all about him, and will talk by the hour of fellows for whom I don't care a stwaw. Maxwell, pway put in an appeawance, and pwove to Sir Gilbert that we are not all ignorant of the people who lived before the Flood.'

Thus summoned, Maxwell came forward, and Sir Gilbert and he touched fingers.

'We were talking of Ben Jonson,' pursued Sir Gilbert, noting that Elinor's colour heightened. 'Dyce has not the honour of any antediluvian acquaintances, but says you have. You remember his advice to the ladies, admirably followed in the present age: "If she have good ears, show them; good hair, lay it out."'

'Perfectly, as also the charming song I think I heard you quote, and of which my favourite lines are—

"Give me a look, give me a face
That makes simplicity a grace."'

Maxwell glanced involuntarily at Elinor, so did her father, and perceived for the first time that she looked tired. He proposed to take leave, and sent Dyce in search of Fay, who soon appeared, sash and black locks floating.

'Here we have your Diana,' said Sir Gilbert to Maxwell.

'"Robes loosely flowing, hair as free."

She does not forget you.'

'Oh, Saar Gilbert, you should have seen what a game!' burst from Fay. '*Hein!* Monsieur Villy, why do you not play? Saar Gilbert, permit him to come to the Court and learn. He knows not the rules, but he is clever, and I teach him.'

'We should be only too—much honoured,' said Sir Gilbert, annoyed, but suppressing a smile, as Fay looked from him to Maxwell.

'We have the party on Thursday,' pursued undaunted Fay. 'Say you will come, Monsieur Villy.'

Sir Gilbert made a second lame attempt at invitation, and Maxwell hesitated, scarcely knowing whether to accept or refuse.

'It is a *fête champêtre*, and will be divine,' pleaded Fay. 'Make him come, Saar Gilbert.'

'If he can resist his *fiancée*, he will assuredly resist me,' replied Sir Gilbert, glancing at Elinor. 'I can only give the invitation to our very humble repast. We cannot entertain, as I understand your uncle does, Mr. Maxwell, and rarely give dinners; but if you care to partake of our afternoon *al fresco* tea, I hope you will come.'

There was a flush of pleasure on Elinor's pale cheek as she followed her father to take leave of their hostess, and a sound of glee in Fay's clear voice as she cried,—

'Adieu, *mon fiancé—au revoir!*'

CHAPTER XXIII.

BETWEEN PRUDENCE AND FANCY.

OUR friends put themselves to much trouble and inconvenience to manufacture our amusements. Are we grateful? The remarks on this 'dull dinner,' and that 'intolerable at home,' are not suggestive of gratitude. Perhaps country out-of-door diversions produce a more thankful spirit, though Miss Whiston's croquet-party was not so enthusiastically praised as it might have been, considering the pains it had cost her and her friend, Mrs. Owler.

General Arlington left those ladies unceremoniously, and returned home in a very bad humour. He had invited Dr. Hope to dinner, and he had not arrived. This increased his irritation, and he vented much acrimony on his domestics as he sat down to table alone. But the doctor came before the fish was removed, apologising for being late by saying his parents had detained him, being laid up with the gout.

'They always are laid up with gout,' said the General irritably. 'Why weren't you at Miss Whiston's?'

'I had so many patients to visit that I could not get there in time. How did the croquet go off?'

'Nothing but tea and flirtation, the men fools, the women apes—quite below contempt. I hate those odious croquet-parties, you know. I suppose you have proposed, and will marry next? It was a strong measure your going off to town with Miss Maxwell.'

'I assure you I returned exactly as I left. I cannot afford to marry, and Mrs. Moneypenny asked me to escort her niece, whose mother is not well.'

'Then you can wait a year or so, you know. I shall probably marry during that period, but it's no good to hurry, you know. I shouldn't mind lending you a helping hand, if you wait till I am settled.'

Dr. Hope did not like this prospect. It did not quite fall in with his plans, but he awaited silently such further disclosures as the General might choose to make. They did not come readily, but after a long pause, General Arlington resumed:

'Oreburn lets that girl appear everywhere, and I declare if it were not for his daughter, you know,—a charming, aristocratic young lady, fit for a throne,—I'd be down upon him.'

'The game is in your own hands,' said the doctor warily. 'You might begin to play it gently—call in a mortgage or so.'

'By Jove! an excellent idea! Tell Butterfield that I want money, and must have the mortgage on Green Oaks. It is only three thousand, you know.'

'Yes, and will be worth double its late value if Sir Gilbert goes on building and improving.'

'The fellow is always in my way! The tenants throw his model houses and liberal wages in my teeth, you know, but not with impunity, by Jove!—not with impunity! Yes, it will be well to give the Court a little warning; so prepare Butterfield—quietly, you know, and not as if I mean to offend, but because I want ready money. You understand?'

'Perfectly,' said the doctor, and sipped his wine pleasantly.

This was one show of gratitude for Miss Whiston's amiable little croquet-party ; there was another while Sir Gilbert was driving home ; and a third during dinner at the Castle.

Sir Gilbert repeated to Elinor what he had said before, that he did not desire any intimacy with the Moneypennys, and was surprised to see them at the same party with her : and still more astonished at their apparent intimacy.

'I was not well, and Mr. Maxwell and my aunt were so kind as to help me,' said Elinor in confusion.

'Could you choose no one else in that large party?' said Sir Gilbert, further annoyed by the word aunt.

'I had no choice—I was faint,' said Elinor.

Sir Gilbert's anxiety was at once aroused, and he tried to discover the cause of so unusual a seizure, but Elinor warded off disclosure.

'I was told you were with General Arlington. I suppose he was entertaining you again with his proposals concerning Fay,' said Sir Gilbert.

'He seems as bitter as ever against her,' replied Elinor evasively.

'You are incautious, *ma fille*, in allowing the ancient beau private interviews. The sweet country is censorious, and it will be anticipating wedding favours before they are ordered. But if he should speak again concerning Fay, tell him we will keep her amongst us. Seriously, Elinor, Butterfield thinks it best that she should continue Mademoiselle de Saint Ange, and that we should let her grow up as such. I am indifferent, since it seems hopeless to discover proofs of her parentage, and the General is obtuse. You have waded through the correspondence?'

'Yes,' said poor Elinor dejectedly.

She and Mr. Butterfield had together read the heap of letters and papers that Dr. Hope had brought, and found nothing that could prove George Arlington's marriage or Fay's relationship to him. They none of them doubted these facts, but felt that it was impossible to substantiate them. So, while Fay was amusing herself by alternately singing and whistling as they drove through the park, her fate was quietly decided.

And her *fiancé* was, in some sort, deciding his. He walked home irresolute. Should he accept Sir Gilbert's invitation or not? He knew it was due to Fay, but, if he did not take advantage of it, he might never meet Miss Oreburn again, and he began to feel for her what he had never before felt for woman.

Before dinner, he had resolved, and during the dessert, said, in an off-hand kind of way, that Sir Gilbert had given him the invitation.

'Rich that!' chuckled Mr. Moneypenny, who was peeling an apple. 'How did you refuse?'

'I did not refuse. I left it open,' replied his nephew.

'Nineteenth century politeness, I suppose. Better have said "No" at once. I hate open questions. Nothing like decision.'

'I have decided, uncle ; I mean to go. They are the nicest people in the county.'

'Nice or nasty, sir, you won't go from this house. We're not on terms.'

'Better if we were,' interposed Mrs. Moneypenny.

'*I* have certainly never quarrelled with Sir Gilbert or his family, said Maxwell.

'As long as you live with us, sir, our quarrels are yours,' said his uncle shortly. 'He carried off your aunt's sister, and never let her see her relatives again. He has come to this neighbourhood, and looks upon us as tradespeople. I am as proud as he. I wouldn't thrust myself into his company, were I you.'

'I should not thrust myself by walking into it,' said Maxwell, annoyed.

'Yes, you would if you went where you were not wanted. And I stake a thousand pounds Sir Gilbert asked you because he couldn't help it.'

Shrewd Mr. Moneypenny looked at his nephew, who took up his wine-glass.

'Pray don't quarrel,' put in Mrs. Moneypenny. 'There was quite as much fault on our side as theirs. My father would not even acknowledge poor Nellie's letters ; and all because he favoured that tiresome General. I hope to goodness he won't get her daughter.'

'Oh, we are coming round too, are we?' said Mr. Moneypenny, looking contemptuously at his wife. 'You had also the honour of meeting the poor, proud baronet. Did he take your measure through his eyeglass?'

'He wasn't near enough to take my measure, Mr. Moneypenny,' was the answer, at which Maxwell laughed.

'Depend upon it he has taken yours, sir, and will fit you to a tee,' said the uncle. 'I would advise you to try a less aristocratic tailor. Your middle-class people not only pay best, but work best. Pull, but don't push.' With which aphorism he left the room.

His wife and nephew pursued the subject for some time—the former being of opinion that it was best to please him who held the purse-strings ; the latter that it was best to please himself.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FANCY PREVAILS.

AFTER much irresolution, Maxwell went to the *fête champêtre* at the Court, to which, he understood, every one within ten miles had been invited, except his uncle and aunt. In so doing, he knew that he was in love, for nothing but this novel passion could have induced him to offend his uncle, or go where he was not sure of welcome.

May and its hawthorn had departed, June and its roses arrived. The weather was delightful, and every one, except perhaps the mistress of the revels, expected much enjoyment. Maxwell was conducted by the ubiquitous Tom to an Arcadia near the lake. Here, amid groves, flowers, and lawns, were Elinor, Aimée, and Fay. Maxwell was that luckless being, the first to arrive. He paused at a distance, hesitating, and surveyed the group. He had never before seen Aimée, and, as she half reclined on a sort of *chaise longue*, he thought he had never beheld any one so beautiful. Her hair was sunbeams, her eyes violets, her face a lily, the light pink coverlet thrown over her white dress a bed of roses. Fay, also in white, and Elinor in blue, stood under a tree in animated discourse. Behind, in the wood, was a Swiss cottage, beside which tripped the fairy brook towards the lake, and through the trees in the distance the Wye was visible. Overgrown shrubberies skirted the lake, and one or two mimic islands seemed to float on its breast.

'Paradise could scarcely be more fair,' thought Maxwell, as he almost hesitated to break its charm. It was, however, broken for him. Fay came bounding towards him with the words,—

'I said you would come. Mees Oreburn assured me you would not.'

Elinor, then, agreed with his uncle, he thought, and he was already receiving the reward of disobedience. She came forward to meet him with a blush and smile, nevertheless, and was about to introduce him to Aimée, when Fay seized his hand and led him towards her.

'This is Angel Aimée—is she not beautiful? This is my *fiancé* —is he not divine?'

Aimée's quiet, unembarrassed greeting set him at ease, and he was soon seated by her side.

'How kind you were to my sister! How is our aunt?' she said simply.

Her words gave him courage to turn to Elinor, and allude to her illness; and so they fell into conversation.

'This is the Decameron without the plague-spot,' he remarked, glancing round.

'Ah! you understand Italian, and like poetry,' said Aimée.

'I did like both, but law makes one prosaic. If I studied in these chambers, the taste would return,' he said.

'I hate poetry, for Mees Oreburn makes me learn it by heart,' cried Fay. 'Oh, I am fatigued of the "country churchyard"! But Mees Oreburn, she needs not to look in the book when I repeat it. Ah! here is Mr. Dyze, in his black velvet and those adorable knickerbockers. Why wear you them not, Monsieur Villy? And behold Mees Whiston with a hat as large as an umbrella! *Ma foi*, she shelters *mon Baronète*. Ha, ha! she is droll!'

One by one the guests arrived, and Maxwell's hopes of improving his acquaintance with Elinor fell, for she was soon engrossed by them Sir Gilbert came at last, accompanied by Lady Clementina Pouncefort, and some young ladies on a visit to her. He saw Maxwell with Fay at his side, and went to him at once.

'I said he would come, Saar Gilbert. I was right,' cried provoking Fay, as Maxwell advanced to meet him.

'Your *fiancée* has possession of you already,' laughed Sir Gilbert, dispelling Maxwell's temporary awkwardness by his ease.

But it was evident that he had not been expected, and Maxwell inwardly bit the nails of remorse for not having listened to his uncle.

'Willie, you here!' exclaimed Mrs. Tenderton. 'Well, this is gratifying. I thought you would be reconciled when I saw Sir Gilbert and your aunt speak. Now I really don't think there is any ill-will in the parish.'

'Monsieur Villy, have you seen the Swiss cottage?' interrupted Fay. 'There is such a feast, and I have already begun.'

She carried him off to that 'picturesque model,' as Sir Gilbert called it, where the repast was spread. Here was Elinor, with her *preux chevalier*, Dyce, and others. Maxwell was soon engaged in carrying out cups of tea and various edibles to the ladies who liked them best by the lake, and the pleasant brightness and piquancy of the scene made him forget his annoyance. Besides, he managed to get near Elinor, and help her also.

'You were surprised to see me here to-day! And I should not have come but for the pleasure of meeting you again,' he blurted out in desperation.

'I am glad you came. I wanted to thank you for your kindness yesterday,' she replied. 'I assure you I am grateful.'

'There is nothing in the world I would not do for you, Miss Oreburn,' he said emphatically, taking from her hand some tea which he had come to fetch for Lady Clementina.

The words were few and commonplace, but they went home, and called up a blush on Elinor's face.

'Maxwell, you are wanted for cwoquet. This beats a London tea-fight, don't it?' drawled Dyce Pouncefort. 'One likes wine and heavy pwovisions best.'

'Monsieur Villy, Monsieur Villy, they have begun!' cried Fay, who had been here, there, and everywhere, untrammelled even by her devotion to Maxwell.

'You have an awfully handsome *fiancée*, but vewy bwown,' said Dyce.

By degrees the party wandered off, some to croquet, some to the gardens, waterfall, and woods. As Maxwell owed his invitation to croquet, he was compelled to play, but Elinor did not join the game. Fay was, as usual, the life of it, and did her best to teach him; but he had no interest in it apart from Elinor.

'There is the villain docteur!' said Fay, who saw every one.

In effect, Dr. Hope appeared, and went towards Aimée, who was watching the game.

'You should scarcely be out so long,' he said, seating himself.

'It is so delightful. Pray do not send me in,' she rejoined, lifting her eyes to his.

'I brought you the book on water-colours I spoke of,' he said. 'Will you accept it as a present from your doctor? And believe that when I seem to tyrannise, it is only for your good.'

'Thank you so much! I know how kind you are. I shall be always grateful to you. Here if I live, and there if I die.'

She turned her blue eyes to the blue sky, and pointed upwards. How graciously beautiful she was!

'Your life depends on yourself,' said Dr. Hope decidedly.

'Do not say that. The issues of life and death are not with us, but with our Lord above,' she said earnestly.

They were used to such conversations, for Aimée, in her innocence, believed she might influence her doctor, whose assertions sometimes distressed her.

'You are much better since you have resolved to get well,' he said, with a smile.

'It is not my resolve, but yours. I sometimes think you mesmerise me. Promise not to do it, for I like to be myself, and not in the power of another.'

'Ah, Miss Aimée, you know not that your mesmeric influence is far greater than mine.'

'Then I am sorry, for I wish only to have a righteous influence.'

'I spoke figuratively, meaning the power of mind over mind, heart over heart,' said Dr. Hope significantly, fixing his strange eyes upon her.

She looked inquiringly into his face. What did she read there that flushed her cheek and quickened her pulses? She did not know; but she smiled upon him and said,—

'I hope we may be permitted to help one another for good.'

He moved as if he were going, and again took her hand. The innocent girl left it in his; but Fay, that general spoil-sport, was watching. She came up breathlessly, exclaiming,—

'Oh, my angel, such a game! We have beaten them to chaff! But Monsieur Villy plays like Villy *mon chat*, that rolls the balls everywhere. Ha, Monsieur le Docteur, how find you Mees Aimée's pulses? You were feeling them when I came.'

He had let go the hand, and asked Fay if she knew where Mr. Butterfield was; and she, who knew everything, said he was talking to some gentlemen near the Swiss cottage. He rose, and said he wanted to speak to him.

'*Grâces au ciel!*—he and his General are rooks that settle not in our rookery. Aimée, I said a story. He was not feeling your pulses. *Ma foi!* here they come. You will have better company than the docteur. I fetch you *mon fiancé*.'

Maxwell was hoping to catch sight of a blue dress somewhere, when Fay once more took possession of him and carried him off to Aimée.

'Remain with my angel while I again *tracasse* the docteur,' she cried, and ran off to a retired walk, which Mr. Butterfield and Dr. Hope were pacing, while Maxwell seated himself by Aimée.

'I must not listen behind backs, but they shall not talk of me,' muttered Fay, as she threaded through trees and people.

Dr. Hope had communicated to Mr. Butterfield, in his most delicate manner, the General's need of the mortgage on Green Oaks Farm, concluding with the hope that Sir Gilbert would not be inconvenienced.

'It always inconveniences people to be asked for money,' Mr. Butterfield was saying shortly, when Fay came up, breathless, and heard his words.

'*Mon bon ami*, Mr. Butterfield—you have had no attention, no wine. Mees Oreburn will be in despair. Come with me to the Swiss cottage. It is already late, and you lose your dinner. Stokes says she has provided breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper.'

Mr. Butterfield, much relieved, nodded to the doctor, and said, 'We will see about it, Septimus,' and went. Dr. Hope cast a malicious glance at Fay, which she returned by a curtsey and wave of the hand, and wandered back in the direction of Aimée.

'They want Saar Gilbert's money; they shall not have it,' said Fay, taking Mr. Butterfield's arm. 'You and my *fiancé*, who are of the law, shall prevent them.'

'A sharp idea, Mademoiselle. Not a word to Sir Gilbert. Where is your *fiancé*, as you call him?'

'I fetch him on the field; but come first to the cottage and eat.

My appetite is continual, and, Saar Gilbert has just remarked, comes with eating.'

When they reached the Swiss cottage, Mr. Butterfield uplifted his hands.

'Call this retrenching?' he murmured, as he surveyed a sort of high tea, which was, as Stokes expressed it, intended to supply all needs. 'Better drive a decent carriage and pair than muddle away money like this!'

It was indeed an unusually pretty and attractive board that filled the available space of the picturesque cottage, and Stokes's culinary skill had been taxed to the utmost to provide it. A cold collation, with wine in abundance, and tea and coffee for such as wished them, to which the guests came and went at pleasure, from the hours of afternoon sunlight to evening moonlight.

Sir Gilbert came in with Mrs. Tenderton and some other ladies, and accosted his steward with,—

'Ah, Butterfield, you survey my clearance fund. I am paying off all my debts at once. The General is now my only creditor, for he has not condescended to appear, though I assure you we invited him.'

'A bad creditor to absent himself,' muttered Mr. Butterfield.

The *fête champêtre* was voted a success by every one, and came to an end, as successes must. Maxwell had enjoyed it on the whole, and had been made happy by talking to Aimée of Elinor—covertly, as lovers will, yet talking of her. Elinor interrupted them, coming to look after her sister. Maxwell gave her his seat, and leaned against a tree. Aimée, whose curiosity had been aroused by Fay watched them narrowly, and wondered why they were so silent.

'He is as reserved as Elinor,' she thought, and talked for all.

So did the setting sun, the rising moon and her devoted Jupiter; the placid lake, the carolling birds, and their own hearts Another scene that Maxwell never forgot.

Broken again by Fay.

'Monsieur Villy, you are wanted by Mr. Butterfield. *Hein!* Mees Oreburn here! Sir Gilbert looks for you to take leave of Lady Clementina, and Dyze searches for you everywhere.'

'I will say good evening, then,' said Maxwell, as Elinor rose to obey.

Ever so slight a pressure of the hand, and they parted. Miss Whiston and others came to Aimée, while Maxwell joined Mr. Butterfield, closely attended by Fay.

'You give the little villain not one *sou!*' she whispered. 'Ah! here comes the pony-chair. I get in and drive.'

Aimée's little carriage appeared, in effect, and she drove it triumphantly to her. Maxwell glanced back to see her get out and Aimée get in; to see Elinor disappear with Dyce; to see a crowd of bright people flit hither and thither, preparatory to taking leave: and finally to espy Sir Gilbert. He hastened to him, who was surrounded by admirers old and young; for it was, who could attract the attention of Sir Gilbert Oreburn, most charming and polished of men. Maxwell bade him good-night, and added,—

'Thank you, Sir Gilbert, for giving me so much pleasure, and forgive me if I have taken an undue advantage of Mademoiselle's Fay's wish to teach me croquet.'

'All is fair in love and war. Our *fiancées* before the world! We have been very glad to improve our acquaintance,' said Sir Gilbert, and they again touched fingers.

'We will walk home together, for I want to speak to you,' said Mr. Butterfield, while Maxwell was digesting Sir Gilbert's doubtful *adieux*.

'Do you think your uncle would lend money on mortgage, or take a transfer? I want three thousand pounds on Green Oaks,worth five.'

'A large sum. Is there anything fresh between Sir Gilbert and the General?'

'I don't know. But I wish he and Miss Oreburn would make a match of it.'

'Too incongruous!'

'Why? he is not so old, and she is at least fifty in sense.'

Poor Maxwell! No one gave a thought to his pretensions. He and Mr. Butterfield discussed the probabilities of the mortgage, and walked together to the Castle, where they found Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny disputing fiercely upon their nephew's obstinate resistance to authority.

'You have done for yourself, Willie,' whispered the lady, as she left the three gentlemen together.

Mr. Butterfield began his negotiation without delay.

'Coming to me, are you?' chuckled Mr. Moneypenny. 'Three thousand pounds are less to me than three thousand pence to Sir Gilbert Oreburn. Money is the standard of value now-a-days. Yes. I will lend the money and take up the mortgage, and then the General and I will fight over the oyster. I shall have the poor, proud baronet in my power, and who knows if, after all, we may not buy up the Court.'

CHAPTER XXV.

LOVE IN VAIN.

The following morning Maxwell and his dog Winsome were wandering amongst the Oakwoods. Maxwell wanted to see Elinor again before he left the country, and he had a vague hope of meeting her. He had grievously offended his uncle by accepting Sir Gilbert's invitation, and was about to start for London. Like many other hot-headed young people, he blamed his uncle for resenting the offence, and became offended in turn.

Contrary to common fate on such occasions,—for, as a rule, nobody ever does meet the person he wants to meet,—he met Elinor. She had wandered into the woods to be alone to think over past events, as well as to prepare herself for her sad future. When he saw her graceful figure in the distance, he felt inclined to turn back, remembering that he had no right to seek an interview with her; but Winsome barked and discovered him. He advanced towards her with a lame excuse about trespassing, and she said she was sure her father would wish him to walk in the park when he liked. They were both confused, and, being each reserved, would probably have parted with a 'good morning,' but for Winsome. Elinor was fond of dogs, and Winsome had discovered it with that canine sagacity which seems to scent affection. She put her nose into Elinor's hand, and looked at her with eyes more than human. Elinor smiled and stooped to stroke her, which somehow encouraged Maxwell. He was not vain enough to say, 'Love me, love my dog;' still he found courage to make the trite remark that Winsome knew her friends.

'I wish we all did,' sighed Elinor.

'Win could tell you of one, Miss Oreburn. She never yet made friends with any one whom her master did not love.'

The word slipped out unadvisedly, and Elinor bent lower over the dog. Maxwell reddened at his own boldness, but it seemed to give him courage.

'I am so glad to meet you once more!' he continued. 'I wanted to make you understand that, although I accepted Sir Gilbert's invitation yesterday, I knew that I ought not to have done so.'

'Why?' said Elinor, glancing up. 'My father was glad to see you.'

'I think not. He kindly asked me because of Miss Fay's importunity, but he did not expect me. Even you were surprised at my appearance.'

'I was very glad,' said Elinor simply.

'Then I do not regret that I displeased Sir Gilbert, and offended my uncle.'

Their eyes met.

'How?' asked Elinor eagerly.

'My uncle ordered me not to thrust myself into the Court, and yet I did so. I am afraid he will not forgive me.'

'I am sorry,' said Elinor, again bending over Winsome.

'It was on your account, Miss Oreburn.'

'On mine?'

'Yes; I could not deny myself the happiness of being near you, and so—I have either made myself the most unfortunate or the most fortunate of men.'

'Oh, Mr. Maxwell, do not say so!'

'It is my only chance. I may never meet you again. I am going to town to-night, and my uncle does not ask me to come back.'

'Surely I can have nothing to do with this. I have already more to bear for others than I dare to tell.'

'Nothing of your own choice, Miss Oreburn. But ever since I saw you first, you have influenced every action of my life.'

Elinor's colour went and came, and she trembled. She could not speak, for a feeling of unutterable wretchedness overmastered her.

'You are not offended?' said Maxwell, after a pause, but she could not even say 'yes' or 'no.' 'I love you too deeply to offend or distress you willingly,' he continued. 'I have no right, but I cannot leave you without telling you so.'

He saw that she was overpowered by some emotion, and he knew that he was rash, yet he would not pause to consider.

'Have I any hope?' he continued. 'I could meet my fate bravely if I had. I could work and win both money and fame, if only I dared to believe you cared for me; I could propitiate Sir Gilbert and my uncle; I could almost change my perverse nature, if you would give me a look or word of encouragement.'

But none answered this eager appeal. Elinor only bent lower over Winsome, until her hat touched the dog's head.

'I know I am presumptuous,' he continued, 'but this has been in my heart for years.'

'Don't!—don't!' at length came from beneath the broad hat.

'Will you not look up and let me read my fate in a face I know only too well?' said Maxwell, in a voice so full of emotion that Elinor cast a troubled glance at him. 'Only one word,' he urged. 'I am so wretched!'

But no word came.

'I deserve your silence for my temerity. You think it kinder to let me understand what a rash fool I am than to tell me?'

Elinor shook her head.

'Ah, I see; I am too far beneath you, and you could not love me.'

She looked at him now, fully and clearly—tried to speak, but failed. There was a light in her eyes, a faint smile on her lips, and a colour in her cheeks he had never seen before.

'Oh, Miss Oreburn, if only you knew how I love you!' he said, with feeling so real that she believed him.

'Thank you for ever,' she said at last, with a great effort—'but you must never speak to me so again.'

'Why?' he almost whispered.

'I can give no reason, but I pray you never to tempt me so again.'

'Tempt you! To what?—love, hate, or contempt?'

'Neither—but irresolution. I belong to my father and Aimée.'

'Oh, Miss Oreburn, you little know the pain you give!'

'I do!—I do!'

There was a momentary silence, during which he saw that the colour died out of her face and her hands were clasped.

'I might make myself a position to authorise my asking Sir Gilbert. If only you would give me hope, I would explain to him at once,' resumed Maxwell.

'You must not speak to my father,' interrupted Elinor eagerly; 'leave me to him—and—my fate. I shall never marry, and I pray to—love—no—one—better—than—him.'

These words were dragged out one by one. Again their eyes met, and Maxwell tried to understand the expression of intense agony that disturbed hers and contracted her broad, fair forehead.

'Must this be final?' he said at last.

'Final.'

'Then good-bye for ever, Miss Oreburn,' he said gravely, and turned away.

Elinor stood a moment, her hands clasped, her eyes strained, her lips blanched, repeating his words—'For ever!—for ever!' He was vanishing from her, and she dared not recall him.

But there was a spectator of their parting, as there had been a listener to their conversation. Winsome stood irresolute between them. She was reading Elinor's face with her large, grave eyes. None could tell what she read, but she suddenly put her paws on the shoulders of the suffering girl, and rubbed her nose against her face. Elinor threw her arms round her and burst into tears.

Maxwell heard, and turned. He saw her kiss the dog's forehead, heard her sob, and was about to return; but in another moment she had disengaged herself from that friendly embrace, and was gone. Maxwell looked moodily after her, and muttered that she had no heart; then he called Winsome, and suddenly kissed the forehead and neck her lips and arms had touched.

'What a fool I am!' he exclaimed, as he strode hastily on,—'a weak, vain fool! What right had I to suppose she loved me?—what encouragement did she give me? A few kind words, a graceful bow, a ladylike smile. Is that enough to authorise what I have done? And for this I have offended my uncle, gone where I was not wanted, said what I had no right to say. By heavens! it is the first and last time I propose to woman! Yet, why that expression of face?—those tears?—that silence? There must be a secret. If only I could see her again! Can one be made so miserable by one word—"Final"? I will not believe it; she is what they say—a quiet flirt. Winsome!—come, Winsome!'

Angry with himself and Elinor one moment, sad and troubled the next, he pursued his rapid walk. Poor fellow! he was utterly miserable, and had not even the slight comfort of knowing that Elinor was miserable also.

He was about to leave the path, and wade through fern and brushwood deep into the wood, when he was arrested by Fay's clear call of 'Monsieur Villy!—stop!—here I am!' He would not stop, but planted his foot on a brier, as if to crush out the thorn springing in his own heart. Fay was not to be so ignored. He was compelled to stop, and turned round with a hasty, 'Excuse me, Mademoiselle, I have an engagement.'

'An engagement in the midst of the wood! You mistake your path, Monsieur Villy. No one lives there but the hares and foxes. Say where you would go, and I will conduct you. I know the woods absolutely by heart.'

'This will take me to my destination by a short cut.'

'You lose yourself, and I find you—that is tit for tat. Be not cross, *mon fiancé*. I wait for you at the well, and, behold! you avoid me. But you must take the letters I have written since my childhood, and that Elinor refused to send.'

The name stayed him in spite of himself, and he took the packet Fay held.

'Now you look more handsome. Here is a big tree-root. We will sit down and make the agreeable.'

She seated herself, her long hair falling over the seat, her lustrous eyes fixed on Maxwell.

'I cannot stay, child,' he answered hastily.

'You must. I tell you what Mees Oreburn and Aimée say of you.' She seized his arm.

'What?' he asked eagerly.

'Ah, you remain! Aimée says—"Well, Fay, your *fiancé* is passable. Mees Oreburn says—guess. You will not guess? She says—absolutely nothing.'

Maxwell released himself from her grasp irritably, but she seized him by the coat.

'I say stories. Aimée calls you gallant as Prince Miravel in the fairy tale. I say you are divine.'

'And Miss Oreburn?' he asked savagely.

'So. You wish her opinion? Why did you not ask it from her yesterday? What a *fête* it was! You had the opportunity. She express no opinion—she says absolutely nothing. Sit down, Monsieur Villy. It is the most delicious seat in the world.'

She turned her magnificent eyes upon him, and he could not resist them. He sat down by her side.

'You and Mr. Butterfield will find money to satisfy those men?' she said, putting her hand in his.

'I have nothing to do with it. Mr. Butterfield is sole manager.'

'But you make the law!'

'I am going away for that purpose to-night, never to return. Good-bye, Fay. I will preserve your letters in remembrance of our strange acquaintance.'

'Away—from me!' she cried, throwing her arms round him, and beginning to sob. She was but a child, though so tall and handsome. 'Am I not your *fiancée*?'

'If you are not, no other woman is,' he said, kissing her forehead, and hastening away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ELINOR RESOLVES TO MARRY.

Two years passed, and no events of importance to this tale occurred at the Court or in its neighbourhood. Life, on the surface, at least, flowed on pretty easily; of the under current—who could tell? Sir Gilbert became one of the most popular men in the country, although he still continued to retrench, according to his lights—that is to say, he drove about in the car, kept a small establishment, and built and planted on. Elinor refused Mr. Dyce Pouncefort, to the annoyance of his parents, and amusement of her father, who was of opinion that 'Dawdling Dyce would console himself.' But, to all appearance, she rather encouraged than discouraged General Arlington, whose attentions were so particular that everybody wondered they did not marry.

They were merely attentions, for he did not persecute her; and she took care to keep Fay out of his way. That young lady grew almost into womanhood, and Aimée recovered health and spirits under the 'mesmeric' influence of Dr. Hope.

Mr. William Maxwell did not revisit the Castle, and his sister was detained in London by her mother's infirm state of health. Mr. and Mrs. Tenderton continued their efforts at peace-making, but had no successes between Oreburns and Moneypennys.

The weight of business and anxiety fell on Mr. Butterfield and Elinor, who strove to economise for the general good. They became confidential friends, and in after years Elinor was thankful to remember that she had only once spoken unkindly to this faithful steward, and this was concerning General Arlington. They had been discussing the affairs, and Elinor had been trying to understand the complications of interest and compound interest, when Mr. Butterfield said, after some demur, that he could not make out why General Arlington had been patient so long, seeing that Sir Gilbert was always offending him, and Mademoiselle was still at the Court.

'Indeed, Miss Oreburn,' he added, 'he told me himself the other day that, were it not for you, he would be down upon Sir Gilbert. His hatred of Mademoiselle seems a passion.'

'Yet he never sees her,' sighed Elinor.

'But he hears of her. She is growing so handsome, Miss Oreburn, that she must be noticed; and people wonder who she is, and say it is time Sir Gilbert should make her family known. I wonder she has not let the secret out herself.'

'She dislikes General Arlington too intensely, and no wonder,' said Elinor.

'Why no wonder, Miss Oreburn? He is a much better man than you think him. I believe that, if you were to accept him, you would find him all you could wish.'

'I!' uttered Elinor, surprised at Mr. Butterfield's venturing to say so much.

'Forgive me, Miss Oreburn; but I am convinced that all these differences would be settled for ever by a congenial marriage.'

Elinor's head rose high, and she said in a cold, haughty, pained voice, 'I little thought *you* would wish me to make such a sacrifice. I believe in you as my oldest friend. Pray never name this hateful subject again.'

'Forgive me, Miss Oreburn, but it was my last hope. I would die to save Sir Gilbert.'

His last hope! The words rang in Elinor's ears for many a day—rang in them, indeed, until her time of decision arrived.

General Arlington had been persevering and patient, but not oblivious. Elinor had borne with him all these weary months, trusting to propitiate him. But her hopes were vain. Scarcely had the two years elapsed when he arrived at the Court during Sir Gilbert's absence, and asked to see her. She dared not deny herself. She uttered a hasty prayer for help, and went to him in the drawing-room. She had a foreboding of what awaited her, and when she met him she was deadly pale. As it was an oppressive summer day, the heat served as an excuse for this, and she availed herself of it, when General Arlington, with real anxiety, feared she was ill.

Selfish people are generally obstinate. He was doggedly so, and was more resolved to win Elinor than ever. He was, perhaps, rather vain than wicked in this. Her fear of giving him fresh offence had made her tolerate his attentions; and he had attributed this to growing affection. He moreover believed that her father had influenced her on the two occasions when she temporised with him in the hope of saving others. As he was more in love with her than ever, it was in this belief that he once more sought a private interview, having ascertained, through Dr. Hope, that Sir Gilbert was filling the office of chairman at an agricultural dinner.

'You want change of air, Miss Oreburn,' began the General, feeling his way. 'You have been too long in Herefordshire, and miss the sunny South. I wish I might have the privilege of taking you there, and restoring the roses to your cheeks, you know.'

'I am quite well and happy here, thank you,' said Elinor.

'Ah! you are an admirable daughter and sister, you know, and sacrifice yourself—quite sacrifice yourself. But I trust the time has come when this may cease. I think we understand one another, and that my patience and constancy are at last crowned with success, you know. Hush, dear Miss Oreburn! Hear me to the end. I assure you I am more than content to have waited so long, having, I hope, gained what I sought, you know. I really do not mind Sir Gilbert's sarcastic manner since you have been so kind, and think of writing to him at once.'

'Pray do not, General Arlington. I entreat you to let this remain between us,' cried Elinor, rising in her terror.

'Impossible! You promised to marry me if I would have patience with your father. I have had patience.'

'I did not promise to marry you, General Arlington.'

'Not exactly; but when a lady says she will marry no one else, it is equivalent; and your manner since has been highly satisfactory. Everybody says we are engaged, you know. I am congratulated constantly on having secured the best match—well, not exactly that—but the most charming girl in the county.'

Poor Elinor! How pale she grew, and how she trembled! She looked out of the window. No Fay! No escape! She summoned courage.

'What are the results if I marry you, and what if I do not?' she said, facing him with cold, stern resolution.

'If you marry me, the settlements shall be such as shall relieve Sir Gilbert from all danger of my foreclosing; if you do not,—but that is an impossible alternative, dear Miss Oreburn,—I must be under the painful necessity of calling in the mortages.'

'And then?'

'Well, dear Miss Oreburn, of course it would be your father's ruin; and he must get rid of that girl, you know.'

'How long have I left to resolve?'

'Let me see. Our little interview was in June,—two years ago this month. I always remember dates, you know. It was the fifteenth and this is the tenth. I came a few days before the exact period, you know, that I might not hurry you. You recollect, dear Miss Oreburn?'

'*I* do *not* remember dates, General Arlington. But am I to understand that, unless I marry you, you will ruin my father?'

'He will ruin himself, you know. But you can save him, you know.'

'You promised not to distress him when I promised not to marry while you lived.'

'Not exactly, dear Miss Oreburn. As my memory serves, I promised to take no proceedings for two years, you know, while I ingratiated myself with you. I have done so, I am sure. Your manner has convinced me of that.'

General Arlington smiled, and smoothed his moustache, while Elinor wrung her hands in agony.

'You drive me to desperation,' she said.

'Not at all, dear Miss Oreburn. I make you happy, and you transport me, you know. I have no aim but that of ensuring your comfort and the prosperity of your family. Our interests will be identical. Your brother will inherit the Court, I settle the Manor on you, and I will even tolerate that girl. As to desperation, dear Miss

Oreburn—you once nearly drove me to desperation, you know, but your delightful change of manner and encouragement have, as Dr. Hope says, had the most beneficial effect on my nerves and spirits.'

'Selfish! obtuse!' muttered Elinor; then aloud, 'I will write, General Arlington, when I have made up my mind. Let me first understand if you are resolved on my father's destruction if I decline your proposal?'

'That is now impossible, you know; but, as I was saying, he destroys himself, and you watch him commit suicide.'

He said this with a slight change of tone, that frightened Elinor. Should she indeed destroy her father, whom she loved as her life? Could she not marry this man, and save him?

'I will write, General Arlington,' she said again, slowly, doggedly.

He rose and went to her side. She shrank from him.

'You had better decide at once, dearest Elinor, you know.'

His manner became suddenly affectionate, and he tried to take her hand.

'I have not yet decided, General Arlington,' she said haughtily.

'Charming modesty! Exquisitely ladylike manners,' he said, withdrawing respectfully.

What could she say more to such a man? Nothing. She must either accept him, or cause the ruin of all she loved. She felt cold and faint, and dreaded lest she should give way, as she had once done before.

'On what day will you expect my decision, General Arlington?' she said, forcing out the words.

'Any day next week, dear Miss Oreburn. But I am sure you have already decided. You could not destroy the happiness of us all, you know. Good-bye, dear Miss Oreburn. I hear that girl's voice, and would rather not encounter her, you know. God bless you!—God bless you!' With which benediction the General disappeared in haste, got into his carriage, and drove off.

The words '*Si tu savais comment je t'aime*,' came through the open window. Elinor glanced out, down the green terraces, and to the seat beneath the great elm. There were Aimée and Fay, the latter nursing her cat, and singing at the top of her magnificent voice. They had not seen the General.

'Yes, I believe she loves him,' sighed Elinor, and, hurrying to her room, threw herself on her knees and burst into tears.

She prayed for help in broken words, for she could not help herself. She rose calmer, and sat down to think. Fay's voice pierced still to where she sat. She glanced from her window at Aimée and Fay. How happy they were! Fay, with one arm round Aimée, one hand stroking Villy, singing that eternal theme of love; Aimée, with a book on her lap, listening. The heat was so great that the birds had ceased their song, and the hum of insects alone mingled with Fay's. The broad hot sun could not pierce the thick foliage of the trees, and the young girls were comparatively cool in their retreat. Lawn and flower-beds in front, park and woodland beyond, how beautiful it was!

'Shall I destroy their peace?' said Elinor. 'Can I deprive them and my dear father and brother of this place, that we love so well—ours for centuries and generations? Is it not better to have one sacrificed than all? And the General is not unkind—not, at least, to me. I cannot love him, but I do not—no, I do not hate him! I am only twenty-one, still I am old—I have seen and suffered so much! I could do my duty by him, and save them all—all! Life is very short, though it seems so long, and I shall not live to be old. If that other had not been so kind, so truthful, so earnest, it would not be so bad. But then he loved me!—loved me! And I must renounce him also for ever. It is one great wrench, like the rope that strangles the condemned, then all will be over. Yes, he shall write to my father. I will marry him, and may God pity me!'

CHAPTER XXVII.

PARENTAL AUTHORITY.

As on a former occasion, Sir Gilbert, Elinor, and Fay were at breakfast when the post brought a letter from General Arlington.

'The cramped writing and perfumed envelope of our uncle and admirer, I think,' said Sir Gilbert, glancing at his companions as he opened it. 'Here is a billet-doux for you, *ma fille*,' he added, and handed a letter to Elinor, which was enclosed in his.

Elinor's heart ceased to beat, as she hastily put the letter in her pocket, and fixed her frightened eyes on her father. Fay also suspended her breakfast to watch him, as he read the General's missive. Sarcastic smiles and threatening frowns alternated. He went twice through the sheet leisurely and attentively before he spoke. Then he said, in his usual careless manner,—

'Coleridge affirms that "Constancy dwells in the heavens above." Your powers have restored the goddess to earth, Elinor. Our inestimable General declares that he has loved and waited long, and craves the consummation of his devotion.'

Sir Gilbert cast a searching glance at Elinor, and ceased to jest. She was so pale that he was alarmed.

'What is the matter? Surely there is no cause of pain to you in an old fool's proposal?'

'Fay, will you take my place? I will read the letter and return. If I might only be alone!' said Elinor, rising in much agitation.

'Certainly. But you are ill,' said her father.

Elinor shook her head, and walked, as steadily as she could, across the room. Sir Gilbert was inclined to follow her, but an appealing glance from Fay stayed him.

'What does it mean?' he asked, as she disappeared.

'It means that he has been tormenting her long,' said Fay, 'and that I am the cause. There will be no peace while I am here. I think he threatens harm to me, and she fears—she is so good. And I am, *ma foi*, so troublesome, that I wonder she does not hate me. But I will advertise for a situation; I have already composed the advertisement.'

'Of what kind?' asked Sir Gilbert, his versatile mind turning readily from his daughter to the sparkling, vivacious girl before him.

'*Cela m'est égal.* A nursery governess, fluent in French and English—for I have no bad habits with my English now; or a *femme de chambre*, who cannot do her own hair; or a telegraph clerk—I should like this best.'

'*En attendant* this advertisement, tell me your reasons for supposing that *you* have to do with this proposal.'

'My amiable uncle detests me, as you know; but he loves Elinor devoutly. He threatens you harm if I remain here, and Elinor, to save us all, pretends to love him. This is what I remark, for I am not Elinor's *confidante*. Let us save her from him, dear Saar Gilbert.'

'Go and see where she is, and return to me,' said Sir Gilbert.

Fay went. She found Elinor in a small room in the east wing. She had the General's letter before her, and was crying bitterly. Fay put her arms round her.

'Shed no more tears, *ma bien-aimée.* He shall never annoy you more while I live, and so says Saar Gilbert. I go from you,—I release you,—and your father protects you.'

'It has little to do with you, Fay; you do not understand,' said Elinor, trying to recover her composure.

'Excuse me, I understand entirely; the old *vaurien* threatens you, and you fear to offend him. When I am gone—as I intend immediately—he will no longer persecute you. *Ma foi*, it is something to be of such importance. Smile, I pray you, *chérie*, for I cannot endure your tears. I go for Saar Gilbert.'

'One moment, Fay, and I shall be calm. It is so sudden—at least it seems so, even though I have made up my mind.'

'To what?'

'To become lady of the Manor.'

'What?' cried Fay.

'I am going to marry General Arlington, and then you will be my niece, and shall be acknowledged as such.'

'Never!' cried Fay—'never! never! You jest. I fetch Saar Gilbert.'

She found Sir Gilbert reading over the General's letter, and lavishing many epithets upon him.

'She says she means to marry him. Saar Gilbert, go to her; she ever does what she says. It is on my account—on yours,' cried Fay, her eyes wild, her hands moving uneasily.

'Nonsense, Fay! she cannot care for him.'

'No, no—not that. Go! go! She will write and say 'Yes' else, and then all will be over.'

Fay held the door open, and, by gestures as well as words, motioned Sir Gilbert out, who went at last, hesitating, while Fay hurried, breathless, to tell Aimée.

He found Elinor by the window, pale and calm. Her head was averted when he entered, but when he went to her and put his hand on her shoulder she turned towards him.

'What is this, *ma fille?* Pray let us sit down and discuss this antiquated swain's proposal; I cannot talk standing, in this furious heat.'

They sat down, side by side, on a couch near the window.

'I will read you this Rimmellian epistle,' said Sir Gilbert; 'it is sufficiently clear, and, if only it were not perfumed, would be gentlemanlike. I really think the old fellow is in earnest, and liberal in his matrimonial views.'

'Yes, father,' said Elinor quietly.

Sir Gilbert read the letter, which was a straightforward proposal of marriage, and concluded by assurances that, if accepted, all family debts and differences would be arranged by settlements, and a general peace signed. When he had finished, he laid his hand on Elinor's, and said,—

'What am I to say? We must not trifle even with so aged a Pericles, when he writes as man to man. I even feel sorry for him.'

'Say—I—will—marry—him,' said Elinor, dragging each word out as by a heavy chain.

Sir Gilbert started as if struck by a shot.

'Marry him!' he exclaimed.

'Yes, father.'

'Swallow a golden bait?'

'Yes, father.'

'You jest, *ma fille*. You will not marry a venerable Telemachus with an Esculapian Mentor?'

'It is you who jest, father.'

'What! so serious! You have no real intention to unite yourself to the old dotard?'

'I have.'

Sir Gilbert sat down again, his brow compressed, his manner hurried.

'You have! Do you love him? I ask seriously, for girls have been found to love old men with *toupets* and elephantine ivories.'

No answer.

'If you do not love him, decline the honour of his somewhat wrinkled hand.'

'Oh, father!'

'That is no answer. I will do it for you.'

'Pray do not. I—I have made up my mind.'

'To what? Not to crown the hopes you have certainly raised? You may trust me to write as a gentleman. I will tell him how grateful we are for his condescension in proposing to exchange you for the mortgages, but that we are not prepared to accept his liberality.'

'Pray do not jest, father. It is life or death to me. You cannot understand.'

'I certainly do not understand you, Elinor. If you are in earnest, I can supply instead that you will thankfully become mistress of the Manor of your ancestors, with the remote prospect of succeeding to their Court.'

Elinor covered her face with her hands, and Sir Gilbert felt that she was in tears. He checked his sarcasm, and continued earnestly:

'Why this grief? There is more beneath the surface than I wot of. Once more, do you love this man?'

'I will marry him, father.'

'That is no answer. I demand a reply to my question. Do you love him?' he said, almost severely.

A sob broke from the poor girl, and Sir Gilbert put his arm tenderly round her waist, and withdrew her hands from her pale, agitated face.

'Do you love this man? I demand the truth.'

There was a pause, during which Sir Gilbert's eyes were steadily fixed on her.

'No,' she said at last.

'Do you respect him?'

'No.'

'Then you shall not marry him.'

'I must! I must!' she gasped. 'You do not know.'

He was frightened at the terror in her face. What did it mean? What had passed between her and the General? He took her hands.

'Why must you marry him?'

'I have promised—I have made up my mind.'

'And yet you neither love nor respect him! Let us see—this book shall decide.'

He laid his hand on a Bible and Prayer-Book that were on the table, and quietly took up the latter and found the marriage service.

'Have you ever read this, my daughter?' he asked gravely.

'No, father.'

'Then we will study it together.'

Sir Gilbert drew the small table towards them, and laid the book before them. He read aloud distinctly, seriously, the most solemn portion of the marriage service, while Elinor covered her face and trembled. When he had finished, he said,—

'Some Christian people consider marriage a sacrament, my child. I am half inclined to agree with them. Are you ready to declare, before God and His Church, that you will "love, cherish, reverence, obey, and cleave to him you say you will wed till death shall part you"?'

No answer, but a shudder.

'You must face this. Women marry for manifold reasons,—a few for love, many for wealth or position, numbers to escape the brand of spinsterhood,—but all have to make this solemn promise who stand at the altar. If they do it without regard to scriptural commands, they sin against God; therefore, as your father in the flesh, I lay my commands upon you *not* to marry this man, unless you love him before all others.'

'Father—dear father! what will become of us if I do not?' cried Elinor, suddenly throwing her arms round Sir Gilbert, who held her awhile embraced, then put her gently from him.

'Now, my daughter, let there be confidence between us. Why are you so agitated? Why must you marry him?'

'Because he has set his heart upon me; and if I refuse him, he will be desperate.'

'Are we, then, so deeply his debtors that we are to consider his heart and despair before our own? He has not been so tender of our interests.'

'Father, he can be your ruin.'

'Ruin before wrong. Let him do his worst.'

'And Boykin—and Fay—and Aimée?'

'Boykin fights; Fay is ready for battle; Aimée prays. Have you lost faith in the everlasting Guide, my daughter?'

'I know I am faithless—thankless; but I cannot see you ruined, when one word of mine would save you.'

'That word would, on the contrary, destroy us. Peace would depart with it; and so long as our love and life last, we may have peace, whatever else betide. What if it pleased God to separate us?'

'I should die.'

'No, you would not—though death is better than shame. You do not desire to marry to escape from poverty, or to reign in prosperity, if I understand you aright?'

'No—no.'

'Then we will face the evils we have so long avoided. We have been cowards, and slavery, the result, threatens us. Let us be brave. I will answer this letter.'

'You must not!—I dare not refuse him!'

Elinor again clung to her father.

'Can you not trust me, Elinor? I will not forget to be a gentleman. I will even take all the responsibility. You have been a good daughter to me, who have been careless in many things; let me, in this momentous event, at least be a good father. Indeed, I must, for the first time, I think, use my paternal authority.'

Sir Gilbert's half commanding, half playful manner subdued Elinor. Tears were her only answer, and he had rarely seen her shed them before; for, even as a child, she had been self-sustained. He scarcely understood her; but again putting his arm round her, he continued, laying one hand on the Bible as he spoke,—

'While we make this Book our rule of life, my darling, we cannot do wrong. I could multiply texts, but let one suffice: "Ye may not do evil that good may come." I will write at once to General Arlington, and politely decline his all too-flattering proposal.'

Sir Gilbert wrote, and Elinor awaited the end.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CLIMAX COMES.

PEOPLE who neither make plans nor look forward are perhaps the happiest. To live by the day is true philosophy. So Sir Gilbert Oreburn was a philosopher. As soon as he had written to General Arlington, he dismissed him and his proposal from his mind, and amused himself by superintending his model cottages, without glancing at the probability of the General's enjoying the fruit of his labours. In vain Mr. Butterfield represented that they would never be paid for. Sir Gilbert assured him that they would pay themselves in ten years, and that he could not live in a palace while his tenants occupied pig-styes. He and Fay did their best to rouse Elinor by a constant fusillade of small jokes; but that greatest of all efforts—the effort to be amused—was too much for her. They saw that, in the midst of an attempt at laughter, a sudden sound would startle her; and realised that, when the tension of long reserve begins to give way, the result is more painful than the outburst of an impressionable nature. She was waiting with forced composure the result of her father's letter, and she had not to wait long. Mr. Butterfield was the bearer of it to Sir Gilbert, in the unwelcome form of a letter from Messrs. Customs, General Arlington's lawyers, demanding immediate payment of certain mortgages.

'War to the death at last! I am not sorry,' said Sir Gilbert when he had read it. 'What are we to do?—or rather, what will you do, Butterfield? For, you know, I am incapable.'

'You must cut off the entail and sell the Court, or go to prison,' said Mr. Butterfield grimly.

'Cheerful prospect! You exaggerate its brightness.'

'I see no other, Sir Gilbert. The General was disposed to be friendly until you offended him by keeping Ma'mselle Fay. He seemed to be getting over that; and now, I suppose, something else has happened.'

'I have no secrets from you. My daughter has refused him—or, rather, I have.'

'I feared as much.'

'Feared! Did you expect her to marry the old fellow?'

'It would have been a good thing if she had. He is not so old, after all.'

'He is older than I, her gently-ageing father. At any rate, we do not desire the honour of his alliance, so what are we to do? It is really too fatiguing. Who could have invented business?'

'You must discharge all the workmen, and stop the building at once; you must return to the old rate of wages; you must'—

'*De grâce*, one thing at a time. I am so unfortunately constituted that I can only imbibe one idea at a draught. How can I discharge the poor fellows, who look to me for their daily bread?'

'They must get it elsewhere.'

'But we must finish those labourers' cottages and Great Oaks farmhouse.'

'The General will finish them, and they will benefit him. They have served to help on your ruin, and will enrich him.'

Mr. Butterfield was angry, and spoke with unusual bitterness. Sir Gilbert heard the words and tone with haughty displeasure, but he did not see how the old man's hand trembled, or notice the quivering of his voice and features.

'I believe the property is mine at present, and if it pleases me to ruin myself, that is my affair,' he said coldly.

'And your children's, Sir Gilbert Oreburn. You have no right to ruin them. I wish to heaven you had never come back!'

'In that also I presume I had some slight personal liberty and choice. I think we are passing the limits of our professional duty, Mr. Butterfield. I am, for the present, master of this poor property.'

'I understand you, Sir Gilbert. You think I speak too freely. I must speak while I can. I vow that it will be my death if the Court passes from the family. I have lived for you and yours, as my fathers did before me, and I should die for you. You would then be rid of a tiresome old man.'

Mr. Butterfield's voice failed, and he took out his handkerchief, and put it to his face.

'Don't be pathetic, Butterfield,' said Sir Gilbert, softly if sarcastically. 'You know I cannot do without you.'

'You must!—you must!—the climax has come!—the climax has come!'

An involuntary sob accompanied these words. Sir Gilbert glanced at the steward, and was struck by the fixed look in his eyes, and the drawn effect of his features. His natural manner returned, and he said, with his most winning smile,—

'My dear old friend, things are not so bad as you fancy. You will get through it, as you have done before; and I put myself in your hands. The worst is sometimes the best.'

Mr. Butterfield shook his head, and muttered again, 'The climax has come!' His eyes continued fixed on Sir Gilbert, and his lips were parted. Sir Gilbert rose in some alarm, and, putting his hand on his shoulder, asked if he was ill. 'The climax,' was the only answer; and the word was nearly unintelligible. Sir Gilbert saw that something was amiss, and rang the bell.

'My dear Butterfield, what is it? I did not mean to annoy you. Forgive my hasty words.'

A slight pressure of the hand was the only response. Sir Gilbert was aroused at last.

'What have I done? Am I to be the death of my best friend? Butterfield, speak to me!—say you are not dying! We will not let a rood of the land pass over to the General—we will do anything rather.'

Mr. Butterfield smiled, and tried to speak. When Tom appeared, Sir Gilbert was kneeling before him, holding his hand and listening for words.

'Send Miss Oreburn—Arbiter, go for Dr. Hope. Run—fly—Mr. Butterfield is ill. Why do you stare at us like a great fish? Go, I say!'

Tom alarmed the house, and the room was soon full of terrified people.

'Come to him, Elinor. Try to rouse him,' said Sir Gilbert, making way for his daughter.

But Mr. Butterfield did not appear to recognise her.

'He have a stroke—I've seen 'em often,' said Stokes. 'Benjamin Butterfield is took for death. You must get him home quick.'

'I think she is right, sir,' said Arbiter.

Sir Gilbert was still on his knees, rubbing his friend's hands. He started up.

'Carry him up to my room. Call the men instantly,' he said, looking beseechingly around him.

'I go! I go!' cried Fay, who was standing with clasped hands and terror-struck face, gazing at the helpless old man.

She hurried off, and soon returned with Jim and one or two labourers. Meanwhile Elinor, always calm in a sudden emergency, had ordered such remedies as were suggested. They were unavailing. Mr. Butterfield gazed on his friends with bewildered, questioning eyes, but could neither speak nor move. The men carried him to Sir Gilbert's room, according to his peremptory command.

Dr. Hope arrived, and pronounced Mr. Butterfield's seizure paralysis. He inquired if any sudden agitation or exertion had caused it.

'A letter from General Arlington's lawyers, of which you are probably cognisant,' said Sir Gilbert shortly.

Dr. Hope asked no further questions, but proceeded to order remedies. Fay went to Aimée, who, on hearing what had happened, had gone to her room and fallen into one of her swoons. Fay gradually revived her, and to her usual question on recovery of 'Where have I been?' replied with her natural versatility, 'To heaven, *mon ange*. You always go there. It is marvellous how you depart from us to the better world and return again. For me, I like this best. But Dr. Hope calls you a wonderful medium! Ha! Dr. Hope! He is here.'

His name brought the colour to Aimée's cheeks.

'Here? Where? Something has happened!' said Aimée, startled into memory. 'What was the matter with Mr. Butterfield?'

'Nothing; absolutely nothing!' said Fay, her face belying her words.

'It is worse than you say, Fay,' said Aimée. 'Tell me the truth.'

It was impossible to persist in a lie beneath Aimée's clear eyes, so Fay told her.

'Go and ask how he is,' she said quietly; and Fay went.

She met Dr. Hope in the corridor, and put the question from Aimée.

'He is already better. I will go to Miss Aimée,' he said.

'May I speak one word with you first, Dr. Hope? Am I the cause of the trouble which has visited the house of my benefactors? Is it on my account that General Arlington avenges himself on them, and causes this distress?'

'Possibly. I am not the keeper of the seals of his secrets. I am only his physician.'

'You know his very soul, Monsieur. You have power over the spirits as well as bodies of the sick. Why will you not tell me the truth? If I am the cause of this distress, I will remove myself from the Court. I would die rather than occasion grief to my friends.'

She flashed a glance from her magnificent eyes so brilliantly decisive that Dr. Hope's fell before it. He was an enthusiastic admirer of beauty, and he was fain to confess that Fay was grandly beautiful. Aimée was as a soft sunset compared with this gorgeous queen of night with her arrowy stars.

'With attractions such as yours, Mademoiselle, you need scarcely linger here,' he said ambiguously.

'Do you mean that the General and you wish to get rid of me? for, if so, I will stay; or do you mean that if I go this persecution will cease? for if so, I will depart.'

'I know of no persecution. You are now old enough to be aware that General Arlington and Sir Gilbert have long been, and still are, at issue concerning you, and probably will be as long as you remain here.'

'Can you procure me a promise that, if I leave, *that man* will no longer persecute Sir Gilbert?'

'If by *that man* you mean General Arlington, I will speak to him on the subject.'

'Then I await the result of your conversation.'

Fay swept a curtsey and disappeared. Dr. Hope went to Aimée, and reassured her by a few decided words. He had, as Fay said, some wonderful power over her. Then he returned to Mr. Butterfield.

The steward was in bed, in Sir Gilbert's large, airy room. Sir Gilbert, Elinor, and Arbiter were with him, watching for a look, listening for a word. Sir Gilbert's depression and abstraction were very painful, and Elinor's eyes turned frequently from the patient to her father. She looked expressively at the doctor, who understood her, and, beckoning Sir Gilbert from the room, led him down-stairs.

'I assure you there is no present danger,' he said, when they reached the library. 'He will rally, and, if we can ward off another attack, he may live for years.'

'If we had warded off the first, he might have lived for years,' said Sir Gilbert bitterly. 'Tell the General what we have done to an old friend between us. But he will not care. He will only be aggrieved because the hand has failed that should have given up the Court. You are not going?'

'I will come again; I am only going for medicine. Pray do not be so perturbed, Sir Gilbert. These things are in the common course of nature, and may happen to you or me.'

'I should resign myself to either of these alternatives, but not to the slow poisoning of my best friend,' said Sir Gilbert, with a return to his usual manner. 'The General and I were at liberty to destroy one another, but not him—not him!'

Dr. Hope withdrew, and Sir Gilbert covered his face with his hands and groaned. Though careless in most things, he was sensitive and highly wrought, and this stroke, falling, as he believed, from his own hand, sounded every chord of his better nature.

He felt a touch on his shoulder, and, uncovering his face, saw Fay. She and Aimée had been listening for his footfall, and, finding that he did not come up-stairs again, argued that something was the matter. Seeing tears in his eyes, she knelt at his feet, and, taking his hand, kissed it, and let her own tears fall upon it.

'Dear Saar Gilbert, *cher ami*, *bienfaiteur!* We will be revenged. We will not sit down and weep while they trample upon us. We will recall Boykin, and you and he will face those bats, and not fear the flapping of their wings. I fear them not, *moi!*'

'Nor I, Fay. But we will not enlist Boykin into our poor army. Let him be our *corps de réserve*, and kept as such so long as we may.'

'Will you not recall Boykin?'

'I have not the courage. It would make him miserable. Besides, he is frightfully energetic and opinionated. He would propose wearisome plans—and plans.'

'Ah, Saar Gilbert, he is a man, and would help us. I wish I were a man. Why was I born a burdensome, useless girl? But Aimée is listening as a lover for your step. Come to her, Saar Gilbert.'

Sir Gilbert obeyed mechanically, and when Fay saw him seated by Aimée, she crept into her apartment, and took up her father's photograph.

'What shall we do, *mon père?*' she said. 'There is no one to act. Advise me, thou who couldst never advise thyself!'

She smiled as she gazed on the weak, gentle face. A noise at the window attracted her, and she turned to see her great black cat leap in.

'Ah, Villy, *mon chat*, you have the sense of the world! What do you advise?'

She sat down, and the creature jumped on her lap, and began to paw and purr energetically.

'Shall we write to Boykin, *mon cher père*, you, and I?'

Villy rubbed his nose against hers.

'Ha! I comprehend. That means yes. We will write. I shall employ my writing-table with result at last, Hitherto my letters have been of the imagination, and to my *fiancé*—written, and not sent. Now I will write with intention. I am a *demoiselle accomplie*—ha, ha!'

This table was near the window. It was furnished with all due materials, and had been added to Fay's possessions as an incentive to neatness. She seated herself at it, Villy in her lap, and began at once, commenting as she wrote.

'I intended this sheet for Monsieur Villy; I employ it otherwise. I begin thus: "Dear Boykin, I have not written to you before, but you know me; I am Fay." That is childish; still, Elinor says I never improve on my compositions when I rewrite them. "We are in trouble. Our amiable friend" (he is not amiable according to the English idea, but Boykin will understand), "Mr. Butterfield, has a paralytic seizure in this house." That is well expressed. "It is caused by General Arlington, who demands all the money due to him on those *maudits* mortgages." That word sounds not in French as in English, so I leave it. "Sir Gilbert is distracted, and we are all deep in affliction. *Mon cher père*, Villy, *mon chat*, and I—we think you should return; but Sir Gilbert says, 'No; it would make you miserable.' I say, 'Yes; for you are a man, and should endure.' Thus I write to inform you how we are placed. I say not that I am the cause of this grief, because they have not told me how much you know of my history; but I love them as myself—better—for I love not myself much. I am not amiable; I am well acquainted with you, and I imagine that you are not perfect, *non plus*. I hazard this letter; no one knows it is written. Excuse bad writing. Elinor says I cannot write because I hold my pen ill. Pray come to your father and sisters—they are in despair; so, also, am I. Adieu. Your"—how shall I end? This is the most difficult part. I have it!—"adopted sister,

Fay." I am Sir Gilbert's adopted daughter, so that is discreet. Now I enclose and direct my letter, and make excuse to-morrow to go myself to the village and post it. I wonder if it will ever reach its destination?'

We wonder also.

CHAPTER XXIX

FAY WRITES ANOTHER LETTER.

MR. BUTTERFIELD continued in an apparently unconscious state for many days. Then his faculties began gradually to return; first his powers of recognition, then an attempt at speech. When he smiled on Elinor, it seemed the gladdest day of her life; but when he vainly tried to utter a word, the saddest. He grew restless when she was absent from him, so she devoted herself to him. Indeed, all gave way to him; and Stokes was heard to affirm that 'the Court was turned topsy-turvy for Benjamin Butterfield, and everybody had to wait upon him.'

Sir Gilbert was in sore perplexity, and when a second letter arrived from Messrs. Customs, demanding an immediate answer, he was obliged to reply himself. He said the first letter had caused Mr. Butterfield an attack of paralysis, and they must therefore either wait, or pursue their intentions at pleasure.

As the steward's mind cleared, his irritable restlessness increased; he strove for speech, and words came slowly, but not those he wanted or intended. Nothing is more painfully ridiculous than such misused words, but Elinor studied them as if they were Sanscrit, restraining a smile when he called a pen a peacock. By degrees he made her understand scraps of speech, and they were ever of business connected with the Court. Dr. Hope ordered all such subjects to be avoided—but how? His intellect returned to its starting-point, and his brain wandered about the same spot. He had but one aim, one idea—the property; and to matters connected with it he struggled to refer.

As Mr. Butterfield had no faith in Sir Gilbert's discretion, Elinor was installed steward and secretary. The key of the iron safe, wherein all the parchments of all the Oreburns were kept, was committed to her, and she wandered to and from Green Oaks Cottage in search of deeds, which she failed to find. The failure irritated the steward, whose attempts to make himself understood became more and more painful. Elinor entreated her father to employ a lawyer, but he, with customary negligence, either put the matter aside, or said it would be the death of Butterfield to let him suppose himself incapable.

But Mr. Butterfield was not satisfied, and worried himself and Elinor incessantly on the subject of the mortgages. It was evident that he could not get better under such excitement.

One day, when she was diving hopelessly into his safe, and Fay was striving to amuse him, he settled the matter for himself. Fay made hazardous jumps at comprehension, and sometimes succeeded in understanding him. On the present occasion he suddenly wanted somebody, but could either not recall or not express the name.

'Where is Em—Em?' he began, fixing his eyes eagerly on her.

'Farmer Emmerson? He was here yesterday to inquire for you. I will fetch him at once,' said ready Fay.

'No, no—not—I want—um—your umbrella.'

'It is broken, good Mr. Butterfield, but you shall have Saar Gilbert's. It pours, so Elinor has taken hers,' said Fay, rising, and suppressing a laugh.

Mr. Butterfield smiled sadly and shook his head. Fay sat down again.

'Send for your—fe fef—feline—fecit,' stammered the poor patient—or, as Fay called him, 'Impatient.'

'Feline!—now I have it. You wish for Villy, my cat!' cried Fay ecstatically, again jumping up.

'No, no,' cried Mr. Butterfield excitedly. 'Your V—fe—finance—he must come—day - morrow.'

Fay stood a moment, watching Mr. Butterfield's agitated, distorted face, then, as by sudden inspiration, cried,—

'I know—you want Monsieur Villy, my *fiancé*.'

The face changed. She was right at last.

'Write—summon—now—at once.'

'You wish me to write to Mr. Maxwell and ask him to come to you?'

'Yes, yes—no one else—not Sir—not Miss.'

'Sir Gilbert and Miss Oreburn are not to be informed. Delightful! We have the secret between us. Is it so, my friend?'

Mr. Butterfield nodded an affirmative, and looked impatiently at the door. Fay understood, and went at once, sending Tom to take her place.

'Oh, Ma'mselle, he won't do nothing for me,' argued Tom.

'Never mind. I have important business to transact for him, and you must do your best,' said Fay magnificently.

'Another letter! A secret between me and my *fiancé*,' said Fay, as she seated herself at her beloved desk. 'I know not how to address him. A letter to one's adopted brother was easy; but to one's *fiancé*, *non!* I have written him volumes, but this must be short. I suppose I must not say, "Dear *Fiancé*," for fear he should make objections to the word; but he will understand that I mean it, for he knows my heart, as I know his—ha, ha! unfeeling to laugh when all the world is unhappy. Now I begin—so—

'"DEAR MONSIEUR VILLY,—Mr. Butterfield requests me to summon you at once. He is dangerously ill, and wants to see you, so of course you will come. This letter is to be a secret between him, you, and me. Can you keep it? I will try, though Sir Gilbert thinks I am like the sieve of those unhappy ladies of the mythology, whose names I absolutely forget. I shall tell good Mr. Butterfield you will arrive by express, and that you will arrange these frightful mortgages which Miss Oreburn fails to find. Your namesake, *Villy*, *mon chat*, *vous fait ses compliments*. Adieu. Yours, etc., etc., FAY."

Thus he can supply the conclusion. He seems not too affectionate himself, so I waste no love. I know not his address. I must go to the Castle and procure it.'

Fay enclosed her letter, put on her hat, and went out. She was in the habit of doing much as she liked, and occasionally visited Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny, so she walked rapidly towards Castle House. Its mistress was not at home, and she asked to see its master.

'I must make my excuses for intruding,' she began. 'I come on particular affairs—I am requested to procure Monsieur Villy's—I mean Mr. Maxwell's address.'

'I know nothing of him,' said Mr. Moneypenny drily. 'He has made himself scarce here for some time.'

'You are not angry with Monsieur Villy? He has no time, for he is becoming a great lawyer. We read of him in the *Times*.'

'Possibly. Still I know nothing of him. He doesn't favour us with his talents. But I can give you his address at his chambers in the Temple. Here are pen and ink.'

Fay directed her letter importantly at his dictation.

'Mr. Butterfield wants him—do you think he will come?' she said, forgetting her secret.

'He may do more for him than for us. Why is he wanted?'

'I do not know.'

'Will you tell my old friend Butterfield that I would go and see him if I could?'

'Ah, Mr. Moneypenny, you may come if you like—every one comes. And you might help Saar Gilbert—you who are so rich. I wish I were as rich as you!'

'What would you do, Mademoiselle?'

'I would give all to Saar Gilbert.'

'He would soon spend it.'

'Why not? Is not money made to be spent? Of what use are sovereigns if they lie idle? They are not ornamental, like jewels; but I would sell those also if I had them. The poor want money—we all want it—yet I hate it, for it has caused Mr. Butterfield's illness.'

'It is a powerful but dangerous weapon, Mademoiselle. It often causes estrangement and family jars.'

'Then I am glad there is so little at the Court, for we all love one another.'

'Still it is sometimes useful, and I wish you would accept a trifle from an old man, and make him your banker if you are in distress. My wife and I are fond of you.'

Mr. Moneypenny took out a ten-pound note in a business-like way, and offered it to Fay, who flushed and started back.

'A thousand thanks, but I never need money. I should give it to Tom or any one.'

'You refuse it, then? It was kindly meant, Mademoiselle.'

'Oh, good Mr. Moneypenny, I am sure of that. May I borrow it to lend to Elinor, who sometimes needs it much?'

Fay saw that Mr. Moneypenny was hurt at her refusal, and held out her hand.

'I only lend on interest. Take it or leave it,' said the testy merchant.

She took it with hesitation, and thrust it into her glove.

'I take it, if you will not be angry with Monsieur Villy.'

'I promise nothing, but "anger dwelleth only in the bosom of fools."'

'Then I am a fool, for I am frightfully angry. Adieu, and again a thousand thanks. I hasten to post my letter.'

Fay hurried off, and on her way to the village met Dr. Hope. He was on horseback, and she stopped him.

'Have you put my question to General Arlington?' she said imperatively.

'What question? I forget, Mademoiselle,' he replied.

She tossed back her hair, laid her hand on his horse, and fixed her eyes upon him. They were indignant as her voice.

'You forget!—you have a short memory when it pleases you. Did you ask him if I am the cause of his venomous spite against my benefactors, and whether my absence would induce him to draw in his sting?'

'I am not so poetical, Mademoiselle. I laid your question before him, and he gave me to understand that, although your presence was not agreeable to him, it was not wholly the cause of his movements.'

'His movements are like the crab's, sideways and backwards, never straightforward. Whither do they tend now?' said the indignant girl.

'Simply to the attainment of what belongs to him, as I understand. He says he is in want of money, and has requested it.'

'He is *l'Avare* in Molière's play, the bad brother, the wicked uncle. *Le bon Dieu* will help us to circumvent him. You are acquainted with his heart as with your own, if you have one. Ha, ha! the fine horse you ride has more feeling. If I were that horse, I would run away with you.'

'Why, Mademoiselle?'

'To frighten your heart into beating; for when the heart throbs, it feels. Tell the General I will quicken his yet some day.'

'I cannot trouble him with more messages, even for so beautiful a pythoness as Mademoiselle de Saint Ange. Here comes my brother, full tear, who will be more readily bewitched.'

'Napoléon le Petit is worth a hundred of you, jackal's purveyor!' she cried, as he rode off, and his brother leaped a five-barred gate and landed at her side. He was after the hounds. 'That was well done, Monsieur Napoléon. I should like to leap over the world so, and tread down every one I hate.'

'Bravo, Ma'mselle!—yours is the spirit for me. Only let me teach you, and you shall ride like an Amazon and shoot like a Swiss.'

'Pardon. I dislike shooting ladies; but I would ride to hounds if Saar Gilbert would let me, only I could not see the fox die. *Ma foi*, we are cruel, we others. We cannot enjoy ourselves without pain.'

'Come you to the inspection, Ma'mselle, that's jolly enough. They've made me captain of my company.'

'I am glad; but we are *tristes* at the Court, and I cannot.'

'Let me do something for you. I'd ride to Jericho for your sake!'

'That is far; but you shall ride to the Manor, and tell the General I hate him.'

'Not pleasant; but I'll tell old swallow-tails. Sep won't like it, though,' said Napoleon, again leaping the gate.

'How well that man rides! And how grand he looks in pink!' said Fay, gazing after him.

She went to the village and posted her letter, then hastened back to the Court.

She went to her apartment, and, drawing off her glove, perceived the bank-note.

'I forgot it entirely!' she exclaimed. 'I will conceal it until Elinor requires it. It will be safest with *mon cher père*, although, *helas!* he would not have kept it long in life.'

She took up her father's photograph, and inserted the note within the red velvet lining that faced it.

'The velvet is already unglued, therefore I do no harm to thy pillow, *chéri*,' she continued. 'I have performed much of late. I have written two important letters. I have sent messages to thy wicked brother. I have nursed the sick. I have been obedient to Elinor. I have sought to amuse Saar Gilbert and Aimée. I have let Dr. Hope know my intentions. And I have said prayers for Mr. Butterfield. I think I improve. *Bénis-moi*, *mon bien-aimé*.'

She kissed the picture, closed it, and went to tell Mr. Butterfield that she had fulfilled his wishes.

CHAPTER XXX.

A SUDDEN RETURN.

A VIOLENT ringing at Mr. Moneypenny's hall bell, in the middle of the night, aroused the household from their slumbers. Where life ticks on like a well-regulated clock, sudden interruptions are terrific, so the servants were frightened, and took long to answer the summons. A second peal, however, brought up the footman, who was relieved by the words, 'You are a hospitable lot, to keep one shivering here on a frosty morning;' and by the sight of Mr. Maxwell.

'Mr. William! It is Mr. William!' echoed from mouth to mouth: and the domestics were soon astir.

Not so his uncle and aunt. They were also aroused, but the former said decidedly that, as he knew it was Willie, he would not get up, neither should his wife. That lady remonstrated in vain. All she got for her pains was the remark that people who came at their own convenience had no right to inconvenience others.

'Pray do not arouse your master and mistress,' said William to the servants, who said his ring would have awakened a deaf adder.

He was soon seated by a bright fire in the dining-room, with a good meal before him, and servants to wait on him. He had been looked upon as his uncle's heir, and his long absence had been a wonder to every one. Nevertheless, he made himself at home, and, when he had eaten, lay down on the sofa and fell asleep. He had been travelling all night, and working hard the previous day. Fay's letter had found him immersed in law, but he felt that it must not be neglected, so he came to answer it in person.

He was still asleep when his uncle and aunt descended to their nine o'clock breakfast the following morning.

'Don't wake him. Poor fellow, see how thin he looks! He's worn to a skeleton,' said Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Pshaw! He's fat enough to afford to be ungrateful. Pray ring for my cocoa,' said her husband. 'Is there no bedroom in the house, Moore, that you turn the dining-room into one?'

The man to whom this was addressed said Mr. William was so tired he hadn't the heart to awake him.

'I should think not, indeed. How you do rustle that paper, my dear!—enough to wake the dead!' said the wife, as Mr. Moneypenny opened the *Times* with unusual vivacity.

There was a long silence, while the gentleman breakfasted and read the leading article, and the lady gazed at the sleeper.

'The cause you were interested in is ended,' growled Mr. Moneypenny at last.

'You don't say so! Which side won?' said his wife.

'Well, right has triumphed for once.'

'Then Willie has gained his suit, and the widow has the property,' cried Mrs. Moneypenny, startled out of her forced quietude. 'When did it end?'

'Yesterday, at four.'

'Then he has been working and travelling day and night. No wonder he is sleepy. Just let me see the paper.'

Mr. Moneypenny passed the sheet. Maxwell had gained an intricate and difficult cause, and had been complimented by the judge. He had worked hard for a poor widow without hope of reward, and had earned reputation thereby.

'I am sure you may be proud of your nephew,' said Mrs. Moneypenny; but her husband, having finished his breakfast, left the room without comment. 'Bless the man, how he bangs the door! To be sure, Willie will awake now.'

Willie did awake, and jumped up with the intention of proceeding to the law-courts; but, seeing his aunt, greeted her with a kiss instead.

'My dear boy, I am so glad to see you!' she said. 'Why didn't you come before? You have offended your uncle, and I don't believe he will speak to you.'

'Not really offended him, aunt?' said Maxwell.

'You will soon find that you have, though. What makes you so thin and yellow?'

'Not yellow, I hope. If so, it is "green and yellow melancholy."'

'I didn't say you were green. Young people always exaggerate. But you might have had the jaundice.'

'Flattering! And I must go at once to the Court.'

'To the Court! For goodness' sake have some breakfast and dress yourself first. They have had frights enough at the Court without being terrified by a scarecrow. You should see your head. Just look at yourself!'

Mrs. Moneypenny took a small private looking-glass from her pocket, and Maxwell acknowledged that he might be handsomer. As soon, however, as he had 'eaten and washed,' as he expressed it, he hurried off, without waiting to see his uncle first.

Sir Gilbert Oreburn was much surprised when Tom announced Mr. Maxwell. He was not, however, displeased, for any new element was welcome to him. When Maxwell told him that he had come at Fay's summons, Sir Gilbert smiled.

'Mr. Butterfield confided many particulars of your affairs to me, Sir Gilbert,' said Maxwell, 'and doubtless thinks I can help him. I am at your service.'

'Thank you; but you look as if you wanted rest. The trial I have been reading must have been hard work, and I congratulate you on success.'

'Thank you. Do you think Mr. Butterfield could see me?'

'You are in a hurry, like the rest of the world. How fatiguing everything is! Even people's speech travels either by steam or electricity. But you will not find poor Butterfield fast, and will have to "moderate the rancour of your tongue" in his presence. Ah, he is a sad wreck, and it is all this ill-conditioned property, and my fatal procrastination, that has done it.'

Sir Gilbert left the room, and returned with a request that Maxwell would go at once to Mr. Butterfield.

'Have I your permission to know the secrets of your affairs, Sir Gilbert?'

'All the world may know my secrets, and I feel sure you could only act honourably. We all seem fated to fall under General Arlington's delightful influence, and if you can either avert or soften our doom, we shall be grateful.'

Mr. Butterfield was pleased to see Maxwell, but his excitement and impatience were painful as ever. Maxwell remained alone with him for more than an hour, endeavouring to understand what he wished him to do. When he had gathered all the information he could, he left, in order to go in search of parchments at Green Oaks Cottage.

Fay was awaiting him in the hall. She went to him with both hands extended. He did not for the moment recognise her. He had been thinking of Elinor, and almost drew back.

'You came—I am glad,' she said at last, angered at his cold greeting.

'Fay!—is it you? You are so grown'— He paused.

'Did you think any one but Fay would be waiting for you?' she asked reproachfully. 'You are also grown, but it is—thin; and'— She also paused.

'Yellow, my aunt suggests,' he supplied. 'But I want to speak to you.'

'Ha, ha! come into the library,' she said, motioning, and leading the way.

Maxwell, who had been living for law, suddenly awoke to beauty—or love—which was it?—when he looked at her. She had a Frenchwoman's talent for personal adornment, and the cherry-coloured ribbon that confined her black hair, and the cherry-coloured sash that hung over her black velvet dress, were worn as easily as becomingly.

'What do you think of me?' she asked, as he looked at her. 'You have been examining me inquisitively. I am going to turn up my hair when I can do it myself; for Arbitère says she has enough to do with her own young ladies, and will not help me. But what have you to say to me? I hope it is a secret, for I love secrets; but beware—I cannot keep them.'

'Mine is a secret that concerns yourself. Perhaps you and I may discover between us what may terrify General Arlington into staying this persecution.'

'I would keep ten thousand secrets to annoy him and aid Saar Gilbert. Continue, Monsieur Villy; I die to hear.'

'I gather that you are the General's niece; that he will not acknowledge you; that he has a morbid dread of bringing your father's memory before the public; and that he has been incensed against Sir Gilbert for keeping you here.'

'That is old as the Pyramids. We have kept that secret since the creation. Have you no new suggestion?'

'You must learn patience if you deal with a lawyer. If we could positively prove your parentage, we might hold it *in terrorem* over the General, or bring him to terms.'

'He knows my parentage perfectly, and you can tell him that we will make it public, if he persists in demanding these *maudits* mortgages. Not that I wish to belong to him—*au contraire*, I continue a Saint Ange; it was my father's name, and the family are a thousandfold more honourable than the Arlington.'

Maxwell looked at Fay in astonishment. She was, to all appearance, a woman, yet still so much a child that she did not understand her doubtful position. He could not tell the beautiful creature before him of the stigma cast on her birth by her uncle's renunciation of her. He therefore asked to be allowed to see such relics of her parents as she had brought from France. She immediately fetched her treasures, and displayed them one by one. He noted each with the keen eye of the law, particularly the pocket-book, scraps of paper, her mother's writing, and the photographs.

'You might gum those fragments together,' he said. 'Your deft fingers would make a letter of them. Will you confide these effects to me?'

'What will you do with them?—and why do you call them effects? Is it that you will make them effective, like the bits of colour in one's dress?'

'I hope so. I wish to make myself acquainted with your history, you see.'

'As my *fiancé.* But I cannot surrender *mon chere père.*'

'If I live, I will return them to you; if I'—

'Oh, say not that dreadful word! I cannot endure it!'

She put her hand over his mouth playfully as she stood by his chair. He took it and held it a moment.

'Ah, that is kind! But did you hold Mees Oreburn's hand so?' she asked, fixing her great eyes upon him.

He dropped the hand.

'Why do you ask? No. I never dared to hold her hand. Is she not cold and proud?'

'As a peacock,' laughed Fay; 'but she is good. You are my *fiancé*, is it not? They jest when I call you so; but I am not angry, because I know you promised. But I must confess to you one thing: you are not so handsome as you were. Is it that trial which Elinor reads that makes you look *sévère?*'

'Perhaps so. Law is severe work. But was Miss Oreburn—were you interested in it?'

'I cannot say we were interested; it was so long and dull. But Elinor toiled through it, and I—well, I did not read it, but I imagined you in your big wig, facing my Lud, and the widow in tears, with desolated children surrounding her. I described the scene to Elinor, but she was grave as the judge himself; or as you, Monsieur Villy, who are grave as the very grave itself. Ah, you laugh and depart, but, before you go, let us make a solemn vow. Do not be alarmed, it concerns you not, but Saar Gilbert. Let us swear that we will not rest day or night until we have righted him, and punished my abominable uncle. Swear, Monsieur Villy.'

Maxwell was standing, and about to leave, but Fay put her hands on his arms, and fixed her eyes on his. How grandly handsome the girl was! He felt it; he felt the light but firm touch of her hands, the ring of her young, thrilling voice.

'We need not swear, dear Fay; but I solemnly promise to do what I can for Sir Gilbert and for you.'

As Maxwell bent over her, their faces almost touched, and as she exclaimed ecstatically, 'That is well!—that is grand! The good God will aid us!' she seemed about to press her lips to his in her gratitude. But, true man and gentleman, he resisted the temptation, and Fay learnt that she was a woman. A burning blush mounted to her cheeks as she withdrew her hands, and let her head droop for a moment before him she loved so tenderly. She soon recovered herself, and, again facing him, with a half haughty, half defiant glance, and a mock curtsey, held out her hand.

'Adieu, Monsieur Villy, *mon vieux fiancé*,' she said, emphasising the *vieux*.

'Good-bye, Fay. We will work together,' said Maxwell, with a glance in which tenderness and admiration were blended.

When he was gone, Fay stood a moment in thought, her hands loosely clasped, her eyes downcast, her head again drooping.

'I understand him not,' she muttered, in French. 'He loves and he does not love me; I see both in his gracious eyes. But he need not fear Fay. She will no longer trouble him with reminding him of the promise of her childhood. Ah, how amiable he was! I remember as of yesterday. I shall love him for ever and for ever.'

CHAPTER XXXI.

OVER MUSTY PARCHMENTS.

WILLIAM MAXWELL left the Court impressed with Fay's exceeding beauty and fascination; impressed, also, with her warm, impulsive nature. Could it be that the imaginary love of a passionate child for him had ripened into the romantic attachment of a young girl, and might bloom or fade in the love of woman? Since he parted from her in the wood, he had been engrossed in his profession, and had done his best to forget the existence of the female sex, save in the case of his widowed client and widowed mother. Now he was again brought into contact with a very fair specimen of it. He had occasionally, it must be confessed, compared Fay's tender farewell with Elinor's cold refusal of his suit, and wondered that the feminine nature could be so varied. Now he wondered how Elinor would meet him, if meet they must. He had kept away from the Castle partly to avoid her, and the temptation of loving 'not wisely, but too well;' and partly because he was too proud to humble himself to his uncle, who had let him understand that he believed him capable of interested motives. He was not of those who thought the world at an end because a woman declined to share with him its perplexities. On the contrary, he had tried to crush out her memory, and to devote himself to a fresh mistress—Law!

Still, he was thinking rather of the fickle sex than of his sick friend, Mr. Butterfield, as he walked from the Court to Green Oaks cottage, accompanied by Winsome. He was, indeed, making invidious comparisons between Elinor and Fay.

With this in his mind, he walked quietly into Mr. Butterfield's office. When one thinks deeply, one is in a sort of somnambulic state, and makes no noise; so he turned the door-handle quietly, and felt no surprise at finding the door unlocked. Indeed, he entered the musty room in a sort of dream. To step from your bed into a tub of cold water is said to be a certain cure for somnambulism, and a similar arousing awaited him. A sudden check, succeeded by a start, effectually awakened him.

A graceful figure, in some sort of dark dress, was bending over a table covered with parchments. One hand supported the head, the other pointed to a line of cramped writing. The face was not visible. On the table lay a hat and feather, and on the hearth-rug a large retriever.

Maxwell recognised Miss Oreburn. She was so deeply occupied that she had not heard him enter, and he was about to retreat, when a sleepy growl from the dog caused her to turn her head with a 'What is it, Nep?' Her eyes met those of a very different sort of animal.

She started, turned red, pale, red again, and at last rose, evidently in agitation. Neither spoke for a few seconds; but Maxwell mastered his feelings first, and advanced towards her with an apology which was cold enough.

'Mr. Butterfield sent me to search for deeds. Excuse my intrusion, Miss Oreburn.'

'I did not know you were in the country,' she said, her voice trembling.

She held out her hand, and he took it limply, as people do when they are offended. There was a pause, during which he glanced at her shy, downcast face, and saw that she looked ill and altered. Had she been rosy and bright, he could have maintained his distant manner, but, seeing her pale cheeks and quivering lips, he was too much of a man to resent the past.

'Are you equal to this work, Miss Oreburn?' he said, pointing to the parchments.

'I do my best,' she rejoined, still looking down.

'Mr. Butterfield has asked me to undertake some portion of his business. May I help you?'

'Thank you. I am sure you may,' she replied.

'I am afraid you have been much tried with Mr. Butterfield. I could scarcely understand him. And these parchments were enough to kill you.'

His voice softened, and she stooped to pat Winsome, who, forgetful of her, his former friend, was responding to the polite advances of Nep. Animals often act as safety-valves. Maxwell saw, in vision, Elinor with her arms round Win as when they parted.

'They are making friends,' he said involuntarily.

'Dogs always do,' was the simple response, and both felt how much more natural it would be if they, too, could be friends.

But they could not. There was the barrier of proposal and refusal between them.

'We have probably to search for the same papers, and glance through the same deeds. Will you kindly show me what you have found?' he said, looking at the table.

She pointed to a seat, and sat down herself, so that they were soon side by side, looking over law-papers.

His practised mind grasped all she knew of the affairs, and she instinctively felt that he was to be relied on. They were soon engaged in a search for deeds that he deemed indispensable, and so, talking, reading, ferreting in the safe, the dull afternoon sped on.

They had been thus engaged nearly two hours, when Sir Gilbert joined them. He expected to find Elinor alone, but Maxwell told him how it chanced that they were together. The suspicions Sir Gilbert had once entertained concerning his fancy for Elinor had faded, and his present calm, indifferent manner quite extinguished them. They were soon engaged in conversation concerning the affairs, and Maxwell again expressed his readiness to act, since Mr. Butterfield would confide in no other professional man.

'But you have nothing to do with common law as a barrister, surely?' said Sir Gilbert.

'I may fill Mr. Butterfield's place as agent while he is ill, and employ a sub during my unavoidable absence in town. We must look for a confidential clerk,' replied Maxwell.

'A clerk!' sighed Sir Gilbert. 'What can we do without Butterfield—eh, Elinor? A clerk would be a frightful bore.'

'Cannot you and I manage?' suggested Elinor.

'Excellently put. We will try. If I had only made my apprenticeship with you all these years! I must now article myself to you, and entreat your patience to put me *au courant* of affairs. Ah, Maxwell, happy those who were born with pounds, shillings, and pence engraven on their silver spoon! Must we cut off the entail, and content the cormorant by throwing the property into his jaws? It would be a relief, if we did not kill Butterfield thereby.'

'If we could only save the place for my brother, I should not care,' said Elinor. 'He has never even seen it.'

'Is Mr. Oreburn sure to return?' asked Maxwell.

'Most uncertain, but as certain to do what is honourable as the sun is sure to shine,' replied Sir Gilbert proudly.

'I am afraid General Arlington may not wait while letters pass between England and America,' suggested Maxwell.

'Then he must do his worst. Were it not for my daughter Aimée, who is killed by excitement, I would resist him gladly.'

'The thought of leaving England would be more fatal to her than change of circumstances,' said Elinor.

'She need not fear. I shall not expatriate myself again. I shall seek for "a lodge in some vast wilderness," or perhaps "a lodge in a garden of cucumbers"—we should then have shade and indigestible food. You will help us to this *pis-aller*, Mr. Maxwell?'

'I will gladly help you to retain your own, if possible; but when selfishness makes up its mind, nothing will turn it, and General Arlington seems resolved.'

'You must not injure your own prospects. Was it a young fair widow for whom you fought so persistently? I must compliment you on your speech, fluent and flowery, as became a defender of dames.'

'My client was not young, and she has a large family,' said Maxwell. 'May I consider myself authorised by you, as well as Mr. Butterfield, to take the management of your affairs until he is able to resume it?'

'From what fortunate planet have you descended?' exclaimed Sir Gilbert. 'After all, mine cannot be so unlucky if it be in conjunction with yours. By all means manage everything; I trust you as—as myself—more entirely, for I awake to the consciousness that I am not trustworthy.'

'And may I, for the present at least, take possession of these keys, and dive into the safe when I like?'

'Keys!—they are my abhorrence. I never know where my own are, but my daughter has a *tendresse* for them, and sometimes alarms me by a furious onslaught on the "locking up" question.'

'I will "lock up" for you, Sir Gilbert,' said Maxwell, smiling, as he turned the key of the iron safe, and put the heavy bunch in his pocket. 'I have your permission also, Miss Oreburn?' he added, turning to Elinor.

'I shall be thankful,' she replied wearily.

'Mr. Butterfield strove to make me understand the connection between Mademoiselle Fay and General Arlington,' he continued, again addressing Sir Gilbert. 'If I should be able to turn this to account, or to discover her parentage, may I use my own discretion in doing so?'

'Certainly—your discretion is your own, but you promise not to interfere with mine; and, indeed, you must not expect much from your *fiancée*. You have seen her. You have truly made a conquest of the handsomest girl in Herefordshire, and her constancy is her *pièce de résistance*.'

William's eyes met Elinor's involuntarily. Sir Gilbert saw the interchange of glances, and, not quite approving, suggested that it was getting dark, and that dinner must be a lawyer's *sine qua non*. They all left the cottage together, and parted at the gates—the father and daughter to wander homewards through the park, Maxwell to walk along the road to the Castle.

Again his thoughts turned upon ladies, not law. Elinor was now uppermost. He saw her in a new light—as the patient daughter, clerk, sister, friend. How she must have toiled to understand Mr. Butterfield and gain her father's attention!

Dinner was nearly ready when he reached Castle House, and he hurried to his room to prepare for it. He found his uncle and aunt at table when he hastened down-stairs. His uncle shook hands with him coldly, saying, in a severe, dry voice,—

'So you have come at last, sir?'

'I am sorry to have been away so long, uncle, but you know how ill mother has been, and how much I have been engaged.'

Maxwell saw that his aunt was right, and that his uncle was offended. He had not imagined his anger enduring, but hot-headed young men are apt to forget that their cooler-brained elders can feel. Mr. Moneypenny spoke no more during dinner, and his wife's attempts at conversation fell lame. When the servants left the room, Maxwell made another effort.

'It does seem a long time since I was here last,' he said.

'Three years,' growled Mr. Moneypenny.

'I have been on circuit and at work continually. I hope you will forgive my neglect, uncle. I am very glad to be back again.'

'No apologies. When you think proper to confide the real cause of your long absence, I shall be ready to listen.'

'Let bygones be bygones,' interrupted Mrs. Moneypenny. 'See how ill he looks! Do make him feel at home again.'

'He looks well enough, and made himself sufficiently at home when he arrived. He considers this his own house, I should think, from the row he kicked up.'

Maxwell chafed under this deserved lash.

'I have always looked on this as my home, sir, but if I am no longer to consider it as such, I will go to the Oreburn Arms.'

'Pray do. You fly into the "Oreburn arms" before they open to receive you,' said Mr. Moneypenny, with a grim chuckle.

'My patience!—what next? He won't go to an inn while I'm alive,' said Mrs. Moneypenny, knocking the table with her plump fist. 'I tell your uncle it was all those stupid croquet-parties. Now for goodness' sake confess it was, and a-done with it.'

'I certainly regretted going to them, aunt, but they were scarcely the cause of my absence.'

'Then what was? Can't you say, and put your uncle in a good humour? He hasn't been himself since you left, and it's very hard upon me, who have to live with him.'

'You look very ill-used,' said Mr. Moneypenny, glancing at his wife's well-conditioned person.

'I didn't say I was ill-used, Mr. Moneypenny; you needn't take me up as if I was a maid-servant—though I'm sure they want taking up badly enough. Once more, Willie—just tell your uncle why you stopped away.'

'Partly on account of those croquet-parties, and partly because he gave me to understand that he thought I was expecting his money,' said Maxwell, in some excitement.

'Now, sir, we can look one another in the face,' said his uncle, suiting the action to the words, and casting his keen grey glances upon him. 'You got a rebuff at the Court, and made me the scapegoat; you got a summons from the Court, and made me the tool. I know all about it, for Mam'selle came here for your address. Pray what is the extent of Sir Gilbert's difficulties? I am an interested party. They say he's ruined.'

'You hold the mortgage on Great Oaks Farm, sir; that is safe,' said Maxwell, with rising choler.

'You mean I can have the farm instead of the money? That will suit very well.'

'There you are! beginning again! I wish there was no money in the world!' said Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Humph! No Castle, no servants, no carriages, no dinners, no fine clothes—that would not suit you, though Great Oaks may me. Any more of the property for sale, Mr. Maxwell? You seem to know all about it.'

'I shall know, sir, if you are inclined to buy. At present I merely answer the summons of an old friend.'

'Glad that your *old friends* can move you from your engrossing work.'

Mr. Moneypenny spoke sarcastically, and his nephew understood.

'You are the most aggravating man in the world,' said Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Then, my dear, suppose you leave me awhile to my aggravating ways.'

'Not very complimentary; but I will go, if you promise not to add to poor Sir Gilbert's troubles, and not to annoy Willie past endurance.'

'Oh, indeed!—*poor* Sir Gilbert, is it? There was a time when you would have rejoiced in his troubles.'

'That was when he had none; and it was very wicked of me. I am sorry for my nieces—sweet, aristocratic girls.'

'Pray leave the aristocracy to fight for itself. Are you going?'

'Well, really!—I was never turned out of the room before,' said Mrs. Moneypenny, rising hastily, and looking aggrieved as she walked to the door.

'You shall turn me out by and by,' said her husband dryly, as she disappeared. 'Now, sir, tell me about Sir Gilbert Oreburn, who had, I suppose, the gratification of summoning you to Oakwoods.'

Maxwell assured his uncle that he came on Mr. Butterfield's account; then proceeded to give him such details as were necessary, in the hope that he might offer aid. He did not do so, however, but listened in grim silence.

'I am glad you are not looking for my money, sir, as you would be disappointed. I have every intention of leaving it to the London charities,' he said at last.

'All right, sir. Don't forget to found an institution for decayed lawyers,' said Maxwell. 'But I wish to assure you that I never in my life thought of the money.'

'Very fortunate; for "he that expecteth nothing, is not disappointed." You are superior to the vulgar dross; for my part, I, who made it, value it above most things.'

'Do you wish me to take up my abode at the hotel, sir?' asked Maxwell, suppressing rising irritation.

'Perhaps you had better not to-night, as you would annoy your aunt and excite the gossips. But I should be glad to know decidedly whether, in the face of family disagreement, you are resolved to truckle to Sir Gilbert Oreburn, and, I suppose, his daughter.'

'I have promised our common friend, Butterfield, to help him professionally, and, so doing, I must ignore family feuds. I am sorry to displease you, uncle, who have done so much for us all, but I had not thought you could have objected to this.'

'I object to your going over to the enemy; I object to your falling in love with Miss Oreburn, who wouldn't have you, had you the face to ask her; I object to your coming down by express at the summons of a mere child to pleasure them, when you refuse all our solicitations;—in short, I object to your line of conduct altogether. Now, may I ask why Lizzie has also absented herself?'

'On account of my mother's illness. She could not leave her alone.'

'Are you quite sure that Septimus Hope isn't at the bottom of her absence? They are both flirts; but moths burn their wings sometimes. However, I let the women alone. You are different, and ought to have sense by this time, and you are of age, and can choose between me and Sir Gilbert Oreburn. Good-night.'

Mr. Moneypenny left the room, banging the door after him.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A LAWYER BAFFLED.

'By Jove! I will go through with it,' said General Arlington aloud, as he sat alone at a well-appointed breakfast. His face was stern and resolute, and he did not seem to be eating with appetite—indeed, he paused often during the meal to utter ejaculatory sentences similar to the above. He considered himself an injured and aggrieved man, and had fully resolved on vengeance. 'The sarcastic puppy! the blind fool!' he exclaimed, laying down his knife and fork, and leaning back in his chair. Then, with a savage face and clenched fist, as if fighting some imaginary foe, he reviewed his life—now silently, now aloud, in involuntary bursts.

'Gilbert Oreburn has always been my enemy. No sooner had I got rid of a scapegrace brother than he did his best to help him. He who never helped himself! And I allowed George a suitable income. Yes, I am clear upon that head. Then, when I might have married Nellie Hope, by heavens, he carried her off! I, a man of wealth, in the army, highly esteemed, to be supplanted by a vain idiot. Then he wasn't satisfied with coming home to annoy me, but he must bring that furious girl to destroy my peace. Niece, indeed! acknowledge her, indeed! I'd see her hanged first. Now he refuses me Miss Oreburn! And I know she'd accept me if he would let her. If I ever saw affection in the eyes of the sex, hers shone with it. And I'll have her yet, or beggar 'em all—all! Septimus thinks I am going to make him my heir. Not till Miss Oreburn gives me up. She never will—never shall. I hold her promise. Her father deserves to be tried by court-martial and shot. Dishonourable coward! To force his daughter to decline my offer, and write as if he were under no obligation. He, whose whole property is mine! Ay, and I'll have it, or my name's not Arlington.'

The clenched fist came down heavily on the table, and the fierce, irritated General got up and paced the room.

'Then to say I've caused Butterfield's stroke! What next, I wonder. Next indeed! Who's that riding past?'

The hall bell rang, and soon afterwards Maxwell was announced. The General smoothed his temper to welcome him, but, after a little preliminary conversation, Maxwell made him understand that he came on busines for Mr. Butterfield.

'Ah, poor Butterfield! Septimus tells me he is very ill. What could have caused so sudden an attack? I always considered him the healthiest man in the county, while I was ever delicate, you know,' said the General, recovering his natural manner.

'He has had too much on his shoulders all his life, and they have given way at last. He is no longer young,' replied Maxwell.

'He is by no means an old man. You young fellows think everybody over thirty, old.'

'Then I am old, General. But I am afraid Mr. Butterfield can never renew his youth—still his best chance is peace of mind. This might be obtained for a time, if you could do without the mortgage money for the present.'

'I am sick of the subject; it quite brings on my palpitations. I am not in health to be wearied with business, and am as liable to attacks as poor Butterfield, you know.'

'You grow younger every day, General.'

'Ah, indeed? I sometimes think so.'

The General complacently stroked his chin.

'You will not proceed to extremities with Sir Gilbert, I suppose, General?'

'I have given the affair into the hands of my lawyers, Messrs. Customs.'

'But you will consider Mr. Butterfield's state,' urged Maxwell.

'I have nothing to do with any one's state. I have ordered my lawyers to get the money, and wash my hands of it.'

'Like Pilate,' said Maxwell gravely.

'Do you mean to insult me, sir?'

'Not at all, General. I only wish to bring you to reason.

'You had better mind your own business. What have you to do with Oakwoods?'

'Nothing. I only fulfil the wishes of an old friend — a mutual friend, General. You will not hasten his end by foreclosing?'

'What have I to do with his end? I want money, you know, and mean to have it. It's hard that a man can't get his own.'

'Very. And his interest and compound interest also.'

'To be sure; you understand it, and I wonder you mix yourself up with the affairs of your uncle's enemies. How is Miss Oreburn?'

'I really have not asked her; but she looks ill.'

'No wonder. I say, Maxwell, I wish you would ask her a question or two for me—privately, you know.'

'I am not sufficiently well acquainted with Miss Oreburn to request private interviews.'

'Oh, but it's all in the way of business, you know. Ask her, you know — well — ask her whether, you know — hem — whether she authorised her father to send me that letter, you know.'

'But I do not know, General. What letter?'

'Never mind. She will understand, you know. The cleverest girl in the county! Would equally grace a cottage or a throne, you know.'

'Yes,' said Maxwell thoughtfully; then, rousing himself, 'On her account alone you could scarcely proceed to extremities, General.'

'She has it in her own hands, you know, and if her prig of a father chooses to ruin her and himself, it's no fault of mine, sir, no fault of mine. If you are Sir Gilbert's lawyer, I refer you to my lawyers. I say I'll have nothing to do with business. I am not equal to it.'

'I am scarcely Sir Gilbert's lawyer, General; only Mr. Butterfield's substitute, *pro tem.* But if you change your mind, let me know. Is there anything I can do for you?'

'Nothing. I suppose, as you have taken up with the Oreburns, you are acquainted with that foreign girl who lives at the Court?'

'You mean Mademoiselle Fay. Yes, I know her, as one knows young ladies one meets occasionally. You also are acquainted with her, of course, as a—hem!—a friend of Sir Gilbert's.'

'I know nothing about her. Who is she?'

'There are various rumours afloat, as there must be about so fascinating and handsome a creature. Some say she is a ward of Sir Gilbert's; others'—

'Yes, yes; what do they say?'

'I have been away so long that I almost forget, and I suppose people have ceased to talk of her by this time. They did say—that is, the servants affirmed—that you knew something about her.'

'The fools!—the asses! What should I know of her?'

'Nothing, of course, General. What should you, indeed? But a chance word is enough for the gossips. For instance, they will have it that you have adopted Septimus Hope, and that he is the luckiest dog in the world. I am afraid they will say next that he is urging you to proceed to extremities. They say everything.'

'Confound them! Let them. I am my own master, and shall do what I like. But I know nothing of that French girl, absolutely nothing.'

'How should you, General? Can you do without this money till Sir Gilbert hears from his son?'

'I refer you to Customs—to Customs, I say. They have my orders. By Jove, sir, you are too pertinacious!'

'I have a friendly regard for your honour, General, as well as for Mr. Butterfield's life. But I will go forthwith to Mr. Customs, and have a talk with him.'

Maxwell was quite sincere in what he said. He had known the General all his life, and wished him well. He believed him a narrow-minded, selfish, but not a bad man; and, being aware of his desire for popularity and position in the county, tried to frighten him into terms by dread of exposure. He left him to meditate on the hints he had thrown out, and proceeded by rail to the neighbouring town.

He had an interview with the head of the firm of Customs & Co., who said that General Arlington was resolved on a settlement with Sir Gilbert. They referred him to Dr. Hope as the General's factotum and medium of communication. Maxwell sought an interview with Dr. Hope accordingly. Here he knew that he must meet caution by caution, for he had had good experience of Dr. Hope's character from boyhood. He tested him in all ways, but could gain no new light on the affairs.

'Really, Maxwell, I should have thought you wiser than to think I can influence General Arlington,' he said. 'I simply take care of his health, and find him a liberal paymaster, and pleasant host. We of the Kennels are too poor to throw away any advantages—at least, I am—and I am thankful for a paying patient. You lawyers *make* your clients pay; we of the faculty are not so lucky.'

'But you have more influence,' remarked Maxwell,—'unbounded influence sometimes. Hence the stringency of the laws when wills are made in favour of medical men. I hope you have no expectations?'

'None whatever.'

'Then I may count upon you to do your best to advise the General not to oblige Sir Gilbert to cut off the entail and sell.'

'Certainly. I will put in a word, if I have a chance. How did you leave your mother?'

This question, so suddenly put, caused Maxwell to fix his keen, clear eyes on the doctor, as if to read him through. But this was impossible. He met the glance indifferently, as one expecting an answer to such a question.

'My mother is worse than when you saw her, I fear, and Lizzie is not well,' said Maxwell, looking him in the face.

'I am sorry to hear it. I don't wonder that your sister is ill, for she is in too close attendance on your mother. Excuse me if I beat a hasty retreat, for I have a patient waiting. One word, however: if you really desire to help Sir Gilbert, advise him to get rid of Mademoiselle. Good day.'

Maxwell felt that he was baffled, and walked homewards, saying mentally, 'Is there anything between them after all, or am I mistaken? Does he expect to become the General's heir, or do I belie him? Has he his own reasons for wishing to get rid of Fay, or is it on Sir Gilbert and the General's account?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FAY'S FASCINATIONS.

BEFORE Maxwell reached Castle House, Fay had arrived there. The trouble at the Court made her so restless that she was constantly striving to do something to avert the end. Remembering Mr. Moneypenny's offer to be her banker, she suddenly resolved to go to him. She found him and his wife engaged in a sharp dispute concerning their nephew, and was greeted by the latter with,—

'Well, ma'mselle, you arrive just at the right moment, for you can say positively whether Willie lives at the Court.'

'Monsieur Villy? He is much with Mr. Butterfield, but he lives not with us. I trust you have pardoned him, good Mr. Moneypenny?'

'Indeed he has not,' said Mrs. Moneypenny. 'He is as bitter as a bitter-sweet; and nothing I can say'—

'My dear, we had better keep family affairs to ourselves,' interrupted her husband testily.

'That is the same—I know them all,' said Fay. 'You are angry with Monsieur Villy because he helps Saar Gilbert; and I come to beg you to help him also. You have promised to be my banker, and I claim your promise. You are rich as the Jew in *Ivanhoe*, and I entreat for money to release my benefactor from the abominable General.'

'How much do you think he would require, Mademoiselle?'

'I cannot retain figures in my head. I suppose it would be a sum in long division—for I have vainly essayed to add up, subtract, and multiply many hundreds that Mr. Butterfield has named. Perhaps you already know, my friend?'

'I can guess. If I were to sell this house, and sink all my capital, I could not redeem the Court from its pledges. You see what carelessness, extravagance, and folly can do. Let me advise you to make hay while the sun shines.'

'Alas! I have not the means. How shall I make hay?'

'Marry the first respectable, honest man that asks you.'

'*Ma foi!* you are droll. I am engaged to Monsieur Villy.'

'I should not advise you to take him. He hasn't a penny.'

'I am not mercenary, and I love the poor people best. I could work, starve, die for my friends; but I should like to murder my enemies.'

Sad to say, Mr. Moneypenny endorsed this sentiment. He was a man of strong likes and dislikes—not quite a 'good hater,' for he was a Christian, but a proper prejudicist, if one may coin a word. He liked Fay, he disliked her friends, both without reason. Like all men, old and young, he rejoiced in her beauty, and delighted to incite her to animated talk. Such was her fascination of person and manner that she was well-nigh irresistible. It provoked the ladies to see elderly gentlemen surround her, but, alas! elderly gentlemen are human, and admire charming youth.

'There is Monsieur Villy!' exclaimed Fay, as Maxwell passed the window. 'Excuse me if I anticipate your domestics and open the door. Ah, Monsieur Villy, this is delicious! I am here for Saar Gilbert. Your uncle inclines towards us—let us unite our prayers. I have asked him for the money,' said Fay in the hall.

The breakfast-room door was open, and there was no escape. Maxwell followed Fay into the presence of his offended uncle, muttering, 'You cannot be serious. You will make Sir Gilbert furious.'

'You mistake. Saar Gilbert is never furious. Ah! your uncle looks at you as the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk." I hope he is not furious! Good Mr. Moneypenny, we come to pray you to help us. We are the groans of the Britons. Ha, ha! Come over and help us. You have money, we have none. Now that Mr. Butterfield is afflicted, we know not where to procure it.'

'Is not his vicegerent powerful enough?'

'Mademoiselle scarcely understands what she is about, uncle,' said Maxwell decidedly. 'If you have money to lend, it would be a safe investment.'

'And stave off ruin one year more? I am too wise for that.'

Fay looked from uncle to nephew in some astonishment. The one was grim, the other grave.

'You will make nothing of them, my dear. When men quarrel, they are as surly as bears,' said Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Ah, but they will make friends, is it not?' said Fay, turning from one to the other, and moving her hands as if she were acting a part. '*De grâce*, forgive for my sake, who am the cause of all the disputes in the county. Had Monsieur Villy not picked me up, he would never have gone to the Court, and would not have offended you, his uncle. Had I not come from France—well, I must not enter on that subject—but the world would be at peace. I understand not why you do not visit Sir Gilbert; but he is your brother, his children are your nieces. I am also your niece by adoption—I allude not to Monsieur Villy at present, but to my relations to Saar Gilbert—you will not let the abominable General turn them from their home? Say you will not, good Mr. Moneypenny!'

She clasped her hands and cast a glance so tenderly supplicating that the old gentleman was moved. His features relaxed as he said,—

'My dear young lady, I should have no objection to do anything I could for you, but your friends are past help.'

'*Mon Dieu!* it cannot be! Say it is not true, *cher* Monsieur Villy!'

'My uncle exaggerates, Mademoiselle. Matters are bad enough; but not, I hope, at their worst. I scarcely think you will mend them by remaining here.'

She burst into tears.

'Ah, my friends! my friends! What shall we do?' she exclaimed.

'We'll see about it,' said Mr. Moneypenny, whose bark was worse than his bite.

'Now's your time, Willie,' whispered Mrs. Moneypenny, but he was either too wise or too cross to interfere.

'I think—I think—I will go,' said Fay, sobbing. 'Ah, I am childish! But I knew not before how cruel is the world, how powerful is money.'

'Don't cry, my dear, don't cry; we'll see about it,' said Mr. Moneypenny.

'He's coming round; for goodness' sake take advantage,' whispered his wife to Maxwell.

'Adieu, my friends. You will help us, is it not? Come with me, Monsieur Villy.'

'I must see Mr. Butterfield,' said Maxwell, and walked away with her, while his uncle and aunt continued their dispute.

No sooner were they on the drive than Fay began her vehement discourse.

'It is I who have caused their ruin, and I who must save them; but I know not how. Saar Gilbert is as *nonchalant* as ever, and continues his building since the doctor says Mr. Butterfield will recover. Aimée understands nothing of business, but thinks, if we are all obliged to work, that she will paint for her livelihood. Say not that I told you; but she prepares my likeness as a surprise for you, and says, "Fay, this shall be your *fiancé's*." She thinks never of herself. Neither does Elinor; but I understand her not. She has ever been reserved. Since the General's letter, she scarcely speaks at all, but sits in Mr. Butterfield's room, poring over those pages of figures, or reading to him from the parchments or the Bible. It is all so *triste*, Monsieur Villy. Even your namesake, and Nep, and the domestics are changed; and indeed you and I are changed since you brought me in your arms from the fairy well, and carried me up this drive.'

Fay paused, expecting a response.

'I hope we are wiser as well as older, Mademoiselle,' replied Maxwell, by way of saying something.

'I detest wise people, they are so dull. But you were more agreeable then than now. I forget not how you sat up with me, went in search of my *cher père*, and returned with Miss Oreburn. Why are you less friendly with her, now she is in trouble about Saar Gilbert? Is it that you admire her no longer?'

'I admire all ladies,' said Maxwell shortly, as Fay fixed her eyes on him.

'I care not to be one of many. I formerly thought you preferred her to me, and I was awfully jealous,—Saar Gilbert calls that word slang,—but now you look not at her. Which do you like the best, Mees Oreburn or me?'

'You, of course. Present blessings are nearest.'

'But when I am absent,' persisted the girl, 'which do you love best?'

'Briefless barristers have no right to love. I have shut my heart against all assaults, and never mean to love any one until I am Lord Chancellor.'

'Then no one will love you. For me, I love—yes, I love—some people—Saar Gilbert, for example, and Napoléon le Petit.'

'Fay, you cannot care for him, though he is a good fellow in his way.'

'Yes, I do, for he will go to the ends of the earth to serve me. Where are they? He does not know, neither do I; but I suggest the Pillars of Hercules. You would not go so far on my behalf?'

'I am tied to the pillars of law; but I would do much for you. You are associated with my happiest hours.'

Fay looked keenly at him, and he met her inquisitive glance with a frank smile.

'Oh, you are yourself. You think of the day when you accompanied me in the fly. How kind you were, Monsieur Villy, to the poor bewildered orphan!'

'I should have been a brute not to be kind,' he said, and then, to change the subject, added,—

'Do not ask my uncle any more favours—you will only aggravate him and annoy Sir Gilbert.'

'I must do things as they suggest themselves. Aimée says *le bon Dieu* puts right words into our mouths if we ask Him, as in the times of the apostles,' said Fay, her voice and manner changing to a sudden reverence.

'You are a strange girl, Fay.'

'That is what they all say; and I have no ambition to be strange. *Ma foi*, it is cold! See that robin shivering on the spray. I think I can catch him. All the robins come to me. My window is full, and your namesake, Villy, *mon chat*, dares not touch them.'

She was off after the bird, her crimson scarf and ribbons fluttering. She approached it on tiptoe, and caught it.

'Ah, it is frost-bitten and lame! Quick, Monsieur Villy—hasten! Excuse me if I run; it must have a warm bath instantly, or it will die.'

She ran along the hard road, past the lodge gates, up the frost-covered drive, under the hoary trees, through the hall, up the broad staircase, and into her apartment.

'I have no warm water. I will light my fire and boil my kettle,' she said, as she put the bird tenderly between the blankets of her bed.

She struck a match and lighted her fire; but the water would not boil fast enough.

'I go for Aimée's kettle. Arbitère always provides her with fire and hot water,' she said, opening the baize door at her end of the wall passage that led to Aimée's sitting-room. 'Hush! she has some one with her,' she added, when she reached the other door. 'I listen. It is the villain doctor. I hear her say the word "salvation." She tries to convert the *vaurien*. I interrupt her sermon, and incur his malediction.'

She opened the door, and surprised Dr. Hope, who was on his knees at Aimée's side, and held her hand in his.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AFTERNOON TEA.

Dr. Hope had been nearly an hour with Aimée, having come to her from Mr. Butterfield. He had found her painting Fay's picture.

'You have caught the young lady at her wildest,' he had said, glancing at it.

'I shall soften that. Does she not grow handsomer every day?' said Aimée.

'I do not admire that dark, sibylline beauty. I like fair, reposeful faces best.'

'I think you scarcely understand Fay; she is as noble as natural, as generous as impulsive. She sat up half the night to finish this *couvrette* for me, because the winter has come. I wish you and she loved one another. The Bible commands us to love all mankind as brethren.'

'I can only love one at a time, Miss Aimée. That one absorbs my thoughts, energy, and hope.'

'It is wrong to speak so of a human being.'

'Scarcely, since *you* are that being, and can change me from the grossness of earth to the purity of heaven.'

'Oh, Dr. Hope, you should not speak thus to me! God alone can change the heart.'

'You have changed mine, Miss Aimée; and if I could only believe you cared for me, I might become what you would have me be.'

'I do care for you, but change of heart is of the Lord.'

Aimée looked up, and her glance was one of power. She did not understand the meaning of what she heard or said.

You care for me, but how?' he asked; 'not as I care for you. If you felt as I feel, you would know how your beauty, innocence, and purity have made me love you as man loves but once.'

Aimée passed her hand before her eyes, as she usually did when in doubt. The action was familiar to him, and he was silent, but he watched her with a lover's anxiety. What was she feeling? She withdrew her hand quietly at last.

'Thank you for your love, Dr. Hope. I believe in it, for we are such good friends, and, indeed, I return it—for do I not owe you more than I can express? Under God's blessing, you have restored me to comparative strength, the power of enjoying the beauties of creation, and being less of a burden on my friends. Yes, I owe you more than I can ever repay.'

'One word would repay it; but you are too proud, and look on me as a possible friend, impossible lover.'

'I do not think I am proud, but—you scarcely understand me, or yourself, and forget our mutual relations of restorer and restored.'

She put her hand again before her eyes. Dr. Hope's flashed angrily now, and he spoke vehemently.

'No I never forget; I am the confidential family physician, and nothing more.'

'And friend,' said Aimée, looking at him calmly.

The changed expression of his face frightened her. She had only seen him amiable and suave.

'We are in such trouble! Do not add to it,' she said.

His face softened as by magic.

'If the General make me his heir, I might relieve it,' he replied, thoughtlessly for once.

'Fay is his heir,' she said.

'As matters now stand, I may inherit his property; she never. Let me hope that I may at last win you, and the difficulties your sister has declined to remove may be done away with yet.'

Although he spoke enigmatically, she could no longer misunderstand him. It dawned upon her at last that he, whom she had believed in as in her father, wanted her to promise to be his wife. Her angelic face now flushed all over. She laid down the brush, which had been trembling in her hand, and fixed her clear eyes upon him.

'Oh, Dr. Hope, I wish you had never said this thing! We have been such friends, and now—how must it be between us?' she asked, speaking distinctly, but low.

'Can you not say you love me, Aimée? From my heart I think you do.'

'I have loved and prayed for you as a dear friend for long.'

'And nothing more?'

'Nothing more.'

There was a momentary silence, during which Dr. Hope sought to find in Aimée's transparent mind some hidden treasure, and she covered her face and prayed. He repeated, mechanically,—

'Nothing more, Aimée?—are you quite sure?'

'Quite. I have promised to give my love and heart to my father and to God.'

'Promised to whom?'

'To Him who maketh sick and maketh whole.'

A longer pause followed, during which Dr. Hope's head was bent, and something like a sob escaped him. Aimée started and looked at him.

'Dear friend, what does it mean?' she said at last, just touching his hand with hers.

'What does it mean?' he repeated, taking the hand and holding it, but not daring to raise it to his lips—for the fascination of inborn purity was upon him. 'It means that you have taught me to love you; it means that, even though honour bid me, I can never love another; it means that you are either my ruin or salvation.'

'If you please, do not use such words to me. You will do what honour bids you, and find a more sure salvation.'

Her voice trembled, and her hand turned cold in his burning palms. He feared he was about to cause one of the attacks he had studied so long and anxiously to avert. He fell on his knees at her side, took both her hands, and, gazing into her now bewildering eyes, entreated her not to give way.

It was at this moment that Fay opened the door and entered the room. Either her sudden appearance, or Dr. Hope's power, recalled Aimée to herself.

'I come for hot water, to bathe a benumbed robin,' she began; 'pardon my interruption. You possibly mesmerise Miss Aimée, and I do not understand the influences. I see you have boiling water in your kettle, Aimée, and it is time for your tea. I will make it as soon as I have restored my bird.'

'Bring it here, Fay,' said Aimée, her voice trembling.

'And Dr. Hope shall prescribe for him,' cried Fay, going for the bird, and taking care to leave both doors open.

The doctor had released Aimée, and got upon his feet, awkwardly enough. He was standing by her side. He tried to speak,—this man of fluent words,—but could not.

Fay returned with the bird, and laid it on Aimée's lap. It began to chirp, and hop on one leg, thankful to be released from the blankets.

'I believe warmth has already cured it, and we may dispense with Dr. Hope's kind attendance, and save our guinea,' said unabashed Fay, looking at him maliciously.

He returned her glance with one equally hostile.

'How tame it is!' said Aimée, pressing the robin to her lips.

Fay bent over Aimée to examine it. The twilight and firelight, the picturesque room, with its Gothic windows, panelling, and bright chintz, the table strewn with flowers and drawing materials—all seemed to heighten the beauty of the young girls, and to compose a picture that stereotyped itself in Dr. Hope's heart.

He withdrew quietly.

'Aimée, beware of that man. I shall assuredly tell Saar Gilbert that I found him on his knees at your side,' cried Fay, when he had disappeared.

Aimée started as if in pain; then said gently,—

'Do not, I entreat you, Fay. I was faint, and he cared for me. We have trouble already on every side; let us not increase it by making mischief between my father and—and—my friend.'

'Friend!' ejaculated Fay indignantly. 'You will find him a hypocrite—a deceiver. Ha, ha! he is a greater coward than his General.'

'Dear Fay, you forget the robin. He trembles again. And you promised to make my tea—there is so much to do.'

'Truly, yes. I have the bath instantly, and your tea afterwards. And then—not the deluge, but all these men! How many there are to manage, and how obstinate, how careless, how revengeful, how dull they are! But none so malicious as your doctor. Beware, Aimée, beware.'

'You need have no fears for me, dear; but you will certainly scald yourself to death if *you* do not beware of that boiling water.'

Fay was pouring water from the steaming brass kettle, and watching the colour mount and fade on her friend's cheeks. Muttering an anathema against the doctor, she prepared the bath, and they immersed the bird. It was finally consigned to a cage, which Fay hung on a nail. Whilst in the act of stretching up to reach it, Sir Gilbert and Maxwell entered.

'We have come in search of tea. Where is Elinor?' said Sir Gilbert, as they made themselves comfortable in Aimée's delightful room.

'I am about to make the tea,' replied Fay, with importance. 'All is prepared.'

She went to a neighbouring round table, on which a pretty tea-service was laid, with the customary amount of bread and butter. Maxwell waited on her, and she was supremely happy.

'We have returned to the customs of our ancestors,' said Sir Gilbert, sipping his tea, as he stood in his favourite place by the mantelpiece. 'Dinner at one, tea at five, and supper at eight or nine. I asked Dr. Hope to come, Aimée, but he is with poor Butterfield. I fear he must think him worse, or he would not have seen him twice. What is your real opinion of him, Mr. Maxwell?'

'His mind is clearer and his speech readier than when I saw him first; but both fail him, and his irritability increases when I venture to suggest cutting off the entail.'

'Then pray suggest it no more. Ah! here you are, Elinor. Now we are together once again in peace. What with parchments, ledgers, and accounts, one's life is nothing but a long bill, all items, and pounds, shillings, and pence.'

As Elinor came in, she looked with surprise at Maxwell. This was the first time he had been admitted to Aimée's sitting-room, and her mind returned to a remark her father had made the previous day. He had said that Maxwell was a gentleman, and that Fay had made a good choice.

'She is constant as the sun where she loves,' were his words, 'and she is devoted to him. He evidently admires her,—as who would not?—and begins to consider her a woman, which I suppose she is. We must give them opportunities of meeting. Not that I want to be rid of her, but because she will need a better watch-dog than I have proved. I once thought he fancied you, *ma fille;* but, thank Heaven, that was a mistake, and I shall not be called upon to endorse your refusal, as in the case of poor Dyce and the afflicted General.'

So Maxwell was installed as attendant cavalier at Fay's tea-table, and Elinor was superseded.

'You see I make the tea, Elinor, because you were absent, and Monsieur Villy he hands the cups to save me the trouble,' said Fay. 'See, he does it as if he were at afternoon tea every day of his life.'

'Poor fellow! I pity him,' laughed Sir Gilbert. 'It is dull enough in the country, but what must a "muffin muddle," as Dyce calls it, be in town? Describe your daily afternoon life, Maxwell.'

'This is almost my introduction to five o'clock tea, Sir Gilbert. I am always engaged at the so-called social hour, and compelled to refuse all invitations.'

'Then is he not a born genius, Saar Gilbert? What a loss the ladies have, and how honoured we must feel—is it not, Elinor?—is it not, Aimée?' said Fay demurely.

Elinor smiled as she glanced at Maxwell, and met his eyes fixed upon her. Aimée said that she was glad her room witnessed his introduction into society.

'To be warm is to be happy,' sighed Sir Gilbert, lounging into an easy-chair near Aimée, and picking up Fay's portrait, forgotten at her feet. 'Ah! this is almost artistic.'

He passed it to Maxwell, who looked from it to the original, and said it was wonderfully like.

'It has been painted expressly for you, Monsieur Villy,' said Fay. 'I have sat patiently as a nun in her cell, because, whenever I have fidgeted, as one must, you know, Aimée has said, "Remember, it is for him." But she promises to introduce the robin. Ah! I have forgotten him already. We were together when I caught him, Monsieur Villy, and the remembrance will be ecstatic. Saar Gilbert, you desire more tea. Monsieur Villy, Saar Gilbert's cup. Oh, Elinor, it is charming to have a *cavaliere servente!*'

Elinor was sitting on a low seat near her father, and her face was hidden. Maxwell began to feel awkward at his novel position, and let Sir Gilbert's spoon fall on her lap. The accident was trifling, but it caused her to look up and give him the spoon. Their hands touched, and the mesmerism of chance is more potent than mesmerism *prepense.* Elinor's pale face flushed, and Maxwell's hand trembled as he replaced the spoon, and took the cup to Fay.

But events purely sentimental are soon either forgotten or replaced by others. There was no longer peace at the Court, and the little party was soon disturbed. Fay had left her tea-table to peep underneath her veiling handkerchief at her robin, and had summoned

Maxwell and Sir Gilbert to look also. Elinor, her elbow on her knee, her face in her hand, was stedfastly regarding the group, and thinking that the attractive, self-possessed, yet perfectly natural Fay was likely to supplant her in more ways than one, when there was a knock at the door. It opened at Sir Gilbert's 'Come in,' and Fay's Villy darted through the room, and leapt on Aimée's lap. Although Villy was quite capable, not only of knocking at the door, but of moving its handle, it was not he, but Dr. Hope, who had opened it.

'Excuse my intrusion,' he began.

'Pray come and have some tea. Fay, if you are a good tea-maker, you have the best cup still in reserve,' said Sir Gilbert.

'I have drained it to the dregs, positively, but I can pour the water through, and make what Arbitère calls "the husband's tea,"' said Fay, 'though I puzzle to think why the married men should have the weak, and the single the strong.'

'Thanks, Mademoiselle. Sir Gilbert, I cannot quiet Mr. Butterfield; he is exciting himself terribly about something, and asks for everybody in turn, but particularly for you and Maxwell.'

'We must go, then,' said Sir Gilbert, shrugging his shoulders hopelessly, and the three gentlemen left the room.

'How *triste!*' exclaimed Fay, with a sigh, letting the handkerchief fall over the cage. 'The robin sleeps in peace on one leg, and we, who have two legs, have no rest. Elinor, why are you so solemn?'

Fay was on her knees at Elinor's feet in a moment, looking up into her fair, sad face.

'Everything about us is solemn, Fay; it is unnatural to be gay.'

'Ah! but that reproaches me, who have been so glad in Monsieur Villy's society. Excuse my intrusion,'—Fay imitated Dr. Hope's manner, glancing at Aimée,—'but I desire to know why you and my *fiancé* keep the distance. I know that the deafs and dumbs make love by signs, and I sometimes see you look at each other as if your eyes spoke, while your lips are quiet. I trust that you make no love, for, as you know, he has promised me for many years, and he must regard me alone.'

'I think you engross one another sufficiently, and need not be jealous of a chance look,' said Aimée quietly.

'*Cela dépend:* there are looks and looks. Elinor understands better than you do, Aimée, because we have discussed this subject before; and I wish her response.'

Elinor put Fay's hands from her lap almost haughtily, and condescended no reply; but the girl would not be so repulsed. She persisted in inquiries, which at last roused Elinor.

'Fay, you are no longer a child; but these questions are neither childish nor womanly. If Mr. Maxwell likes you, and you are so devoted to him, you need have no fear of my rivalship. You are already older than I in this lore, and I have small chance of attaining your intuitive knowledge, having no inclination for the study. Pray let this subject drop.'

Elinor's voice and manner were so unnaturally constrained and haughty that even Aimée was surprised. Fay rose in some alarm, and stood before the sisters.

'Ah, now you are cross, Elinor. What have I said amiss, Aimée? I only desire to keep my *fiancé*. You know he is mine, is it not?' Her voice was pathetic, and she clasped her hands.

'Dear Fay, as I understand these things, it is not for the woman to tell her love until the man tells his,' said Aimée, in her quiet, quaint way. 'Perhaps you had better wait until Mr. Maxwell declares himself positively. You are very young, and people will call you fast if you are so demonstrative. I scarcely think he may like it.'

'I have been always the same to him since I was a child, and he to me,' said Fay innocently. 'Is he not divine?'

'No, he seems to me quite human. You should not use holy words for secular purposes.'

'Ah, if you start the metaphysics, I can no longer listen; even Elinor is *gênée* and leaves the room. One can be even too religious. Elinor, *if I have intruded— Ma foi!* she is gone, and I am in disgrace!'

The truth was that poor Elinor had felt hot tears springing to her eyes when Aimée had also shown that she looked on Maxwell as Fay's lover. It is ever humiliating to be set aside for another, and although she knew that she had positively refused him,—knew that she had solemnly promised never to marry while General Arlington lived,—she was still indignant at his desertion. Therefore she had left Aimée's room to seek her own, and add more to the thousands of tears she had already shed there.

But neither her tears nor the versatility of her late companions lasted long. They were interrupted by a summons to Mr. Butterfield, who wanted every one, and could be understood by none.

They all met in the sick-room. Mr. Butterfield was in a large easy-chair near the bed, and appeared to be making progress. His white hair and long white beard had been dressed as carefully as usual by Elinor's tender fingers, and gave a reverend expression to his pale, anxious face. At his side was a table, on which were the Bible and books of prayer that she or Sir Gilbert read to him, together with several periodicals; pen, ink, and paper were strictly prohibited—indeed, he could not well have used them.

Sir Gilbert was sitting on the bed, Maxwell at the table, the doctor standing in front. Elinor took a chair between the two latter, and

Fay stood near Sir Gilbert and Aimée. The steward was surrounded by those who knew and understood him best. The efforts he made to recover his lost language were always extremely painful, but on this occasion they became almost terrific. He wanted to say something concerning Elinor and Fay, apparently, for he pointed and gesticulated towards them, while he talked of justice, judgment, gossip, and many other incoherent words.

'You may depend on our being just, dear Mr. Butterfield,' said Elinor gently.

'No justice—if—if—the entail,' said he, with excitement.

'We have arranged to have nothing to do with it. We will keep the Court,' interrupted Fay, pressing Sir Gilbert's hand as he was about to speak, and adding in a whisper, 'I understand to quiet him.'

Mr. Butterfield smiled.

'But—but—he—the Justice—will not be satisfied unless Miss'— He shook his head sadly at Elinor, being unable to utter her name.

'Hush, Saar Gilbert—I make a dash at it,' said Fay.—'You mean, good friend, that the General must marry Miss Oreburn, and so justice will be satisfied as well as the General? That is already arranged. See, his countenance grows angelic!'

'Fay!—Mademoiselle!' escaped from the group; but Mr. Butterfield smiled benignantly at Elinor, whose face was crimson.

Fay waved her hands, and said in French,—

'Leave him to me; I know how to tranquillise him. He calls always the General the Justice.'

Mr. Butterfield now turned to Dr. Hope, and made some ineffectual attempts at a long speech concerning him and the Justice. All listened attentively, and this time the doctor believed that he understood.

'You wish me to bring the General here? I am afraid he is too ill, but I will name your request to him.'

'No, no—not here; at the—the farm. Persuade him,' said Mr. Butterfield irritably.

Fay interrupted the doctor.

'You mean that, as Dr. Hope can twist the General round his little finger, he must persuade him to give the Court to Saar Gilbert—is it not, good Mr. Butterfield? You do not want him here, but at the Manor?'

'Yes, yes—and you, ma'am—you must, my dear. Go! go! the Justice is—famished. You all know what I mean. Cannot you help me?'

'Will you take a composing draught?' said the doctor. 'We will attend to your wishes afterwards.'

'Permit me to be the draught, and to compose him,' said Fay, leaving Sir Gilbert's side.

She went to Mr. Butterfield, and, kneeling by his chair, took his poor hand in hers. Then she said, with strange earnestness and solemnity,—

'I swear before you all to leave this country, if my absence can cause the General to relent. I have already commissioned Dr. Hope to inquire, but he brings me no satisfactory answer. Perhaps, my friends, you will strengthen my request by your entreaties. Under all circumstances, you perceive, good Mr. Butterfield, that Saar Gilbert is safe. The General marries Mees Oreburn, I return to France, Boykin comes home, the entail is *not* cut off, you recover, and the joy-bells ring.'

Mr. Butterfield's excitement calmed as if by magic. He tried to press Fay's hands, and glanced from Sir Gilbert to Elinor. The former was beginning to protest against Fay's declaration, the latter covered her face with her hand, and let her tears fall quietly, while Maxwell sat by her side watching her. Fay glanced over her shoulder at Sir Gilbert, and continued in rapid French :

'*De grâce*, be silent ; he composes himself. What matter my poor words if the sick man is cured? Do not disabuse him. I would tell a thousand lies to give him this moment of ease.'

Sir Gilbert obeyed, and no one spoke. The sudden silence seemed to lull the steward's senses, and his eyes closed. He had fallen asleep, like a contented child.

CHAPTER XXXV.

FAY APPEALS TO HER UNCLE.

WHILE Ruin looked mercilessly down upon the Court, Peace smiled on the Manor. General Arlington was happy in the consciousness that his lawyers and doctor would manage his temporal and physical affairs between them, and contentedly left them to their superintendence. He was in daily expectation of a visit from Maxwell, who would bring him, he was assured, a favourable response from Miss Oreburn.

One morning the hall bell rang earlier than was its custom, and he said to himself, 'Here he is, I'll be bound ;' but his footman announced, 'A young lady, sir, in the drawing-room,' instead.

'A young lady !—who?' he asked eagerly.

'She has such a thick veil on, sir, that I couldn't see her face.'

'Why didn't you ask her name?'

'I did, sir, but she said, "Never mind; General Arlington will know."'

'Is she tall or short?'

'Tall, sir.'

'Say I'll come directly. Stir the fire. I suppose it is lighted? Very well. Then arrange the photograph-books, and see that the room is comfortable.'

'Yes, sir,' said the man, and left the dining-room.

'Miss Oreburn!' muttered the General. 'I'll go and make myself presentable. I swore I'd have her, and so I will!'

He went up-stairs and arranged his hair, moustache, and dress; then he came down again and went to the drawing-room door. He was so nervous that he held the handle some time before he had the courage to turn it; but he went in at last noiselessly.

It was a large room, with a fireplace at either end, and the fire was lighted in the one farthest from the door. It was Christmas Eve, and very cold, so he was not surprised to see his visitor standing with her foot on the fender looking into the fire. She was much wrapped up in furs and a crimson mantle, and had her veil still down.

'Yes, it is Miss Oreburn,' he thought, as he advanced into his magnificent apartment.

It was so long, and the carpet so soft, that she did not at first hear his step; therefore, as he drew near her, he spoke in his tenderest, most delicate voice.

'Miss Oreburn, this is too much honour.'

She started, turned, stepped forward, and threw back her veil.

'It is not Miss Oreburn, it is Mademoiselle de Saint Ange.'

It was indeed Fay.

The General halted at a little distance, with a curse rather than a blessing on his lips. They stood a few moments at bay, surveying each other. He saw a distinguished-looking girl, elegantly dressed—she an old beau, also *tiré à quatre épingles*. Her black velvet hat and ostrich feather seemed to sit uneasily on the huge coil of hair beneath, while the crimson mantle was thrown back from the skirts, also of black velvet.

Men worship beauty, even if it anger them, and the General bowed low in spite of himself. He had not been brought into actual contact with her since she had grown into womanhood, and he was struck by her handsome face and majestic figure. A rapid walk of six miles had brought the crimson to her cheeks, and her eyes flashed fire. He moved a chair towards her, and said,—

'Will you sit down, Mademoiselle?'

'Thank you, sir, I will stand,' she replied.

A small ermine muff fell at her feet. He picked it up instinctively, and laid it on an ottoman.

'To what am I indebted for this honour, Mademoiselle?' he asked.

'To my determination to learn from your own lips, sir, whether it is on my account that you persecute Saar Gilbert Oreburn?' she replied.

'Dr. Hope has already conveyed my answer to that question,' he said, irritation already supplanting assumed composure.

'I do not believe in Dr. Hope, therefore I come to you. You are at least a gentleman. When I was a child I understood not things as now, and I would place them before you as I see them. I do not desire to be your niece, yet you persecute my benefactors because I am your niece. Is it not so?'

'I refer you to Dr. Hope. I decline to answer.'

'I will not apply to him, sir. He hates me, and desires to be your heir. I read him as I read you, and I find him more wicked than you, even though you forsook your own brother, and disown me, his child.'

'He was his own enemy, you know. He ruined himself and disgraced me,' said the General excitedly.

'Silence, sir! I stand not to hear my father maligned!' exclaimed Fay, stretching out her hand towards him. 'But I came not to speak of him, but to demand from you the answer to my question. Is it on my account that you visit on my benefactor the extravagance of his forefathers, and plot the ruin of a noble family?'

'They have ruined themselves. I have nothing whatever to do with it. I merely demand my own.'

'Have you not enough in this gorgeous house and spreading lands, without desiring your neighbour's wealth? It is the parable of the king and the one ewe lamb.'

'Were you not a lady, I should not submit to be insulted in my own house,' said the General wrathfully.

'Pardon, Monsieur. I came not to insult, but to persuade and entreat; but I inherit quickness of temper from my father's family. I understand that your tempers are not perfect. However, I calm myself as I calm Mr. Butterfield. I have promised him, on your behalf, that you will still have patience, and not persecute Saar Gilbert.'

'What right have you to promise, Mademoiselle?'

'I have promised in this wise. When I was brought to this country, it was to you, as my natural guardian. You refused to receive me, and Saar Gilbert took pity on me. This has annoyed you ever since;

and now that I am grown up and able to assert myself, you draw your meshes so closely round my benefactor that he cannot escape; and you cause the death of his steward and friend. I have promised to withdraw from your presence and from this country, to—to the Antipodes, if you will, provided you will spare Saar Gilbert.'

'Your promises avail no longer. Had you been sent away seven or eight years ago, matters might have been altered, you know. Now, the inquiries I have made abroad render your presence or absence indifferent to me, beyond my dislike—to—scenes such as these, you know.'

'Sir, I do not know,' said Fay, smiling, in spite of anger, as she remembered Sir Gilbert's imitative 'you knows.' 'The answers to your inquiries are false, and if you persecute Saar Gilbert I will move the world until I prove them so. I will live for one purpose alone—I will wander through France until I find my mother's family, and assert myself your brother's daughter. But I am ever the Saint Ange, for I hate the Arlington.'

Fay enunciated these last words heartily, and the General smiled superciliously.

'We believe that you are a Saint Ange, Mademoiselle,' he said.

'Then, *ma foi*, Monsieur, I am the Arlington, if that circumvent you—I proclaim myself such at the Court, the Castle, the village, the town—in the newspapers—everywhere.'

'Then, by Heaven! I will have every ounce of gold and every rood of land that Gilbert Oreburn calls his own!'

'Sir, you dare not!'

'Mademoiselle, I dare and will!'

She seized his arm indignantly, he grasped hers fiercely, and they stood thus a moment, gazing at one another. Fay was slightly taller than her uncle, and her white plume nodded in her hat, as if she were the soldier, he the woman. She recovered herself first, and, throwing all the contempt she felt into her look and tone, said,—

'You hurt me, sir. Your hand, as well as your heart, is of iron—harder than the gauntlet of the ancient warriors, which was cast down to challenge protection for the weak.'

He let her arm go, and she flung up the loose sleeve, and displayed a red mark.

'This is not the first time you have hurt a woman. I have seen Miss Oreburn faint after an interview with you.'

That shaft went home. He remembered that once before Elinor had also used the words, 'You hurt me, sir.'

'I beg your pardon. I did not mean to harm you,' he said, after a short pause. 'But you excite me, and I cannot bear excitement.'

'I will be calm as the statue of Niobe, representing misery and tears, could I move you to pity,' said Fay, her voice sinking to a touching sweetness. 'Destroy the mortgages, as I would were they mine, and you will make the happiness of an entire family, and save the life of a friend.'

She clasped her hands appealingly, and for a moment his face softened.

'You will pardon my sitting down, and perhaps be seated yourself. I cannot talk standing,' he said, taking a chair.

'I will not sit in the house of my enemy,' she replied.

His face hardened again.

'Then perhaps you will end this — this useless interview,' he rejoined, his eyes flashing anger.

'End it!—*O Ciel!* how cruelly you speak! Did you ever love your only brother, sir? When you were young together, did you love one another?'

'My feelings were fraternal while his conduct was honourable; when he disgraced our name, brotherhood ceased.'

'As in the Wars of the Roses, sir, you would have killed him rather than forgive him. That is like Cain.'

'I am no murderer. What right have you to accuse me of murder?—here—in my own house—in—in'—

'The right of daughterhood as set against your lost brotherhood, sir,' interrupted Fay. 'I am your only brother's only child, and I loved him—oh, I loved him!'

She again clasped her hands, and tears sprang to her eyes, heightening their marvellous beauty and softening their animosity. His features relaxed, but he said stiffly,—

'Anything more, Mademoiselle?'

'More! *O Ciel! que veut-il?* Have you no regard for your brother's memory? He sometimes spoke of you with tenderness as "my brother."'

The tears rolled slowly down her cheeks, he moved uneasily, and an expression of pain contracted his mouth.

'I cannot endure this,' he muttered.

'Oh, sir, if you but knew how he suffered. We were so poor—so poor that but for the tender charity of strangers we might have died of starvation.'

'Why do you tell me this? Of what use, now all is over?'

'To save more sin, and more starvation.'

A sob broke Fay's voice, and the General was moved by some feeling; for he started up, then sat down, then looked at her. She continued:

'You cannot recall the dead father—the injured brother; but you may save his child's benefactors, and spare the pain, the sin, the shame— Oh, sir, let me pray for them! Save him, my second father; have pity on my more than sisters and my unknown brother; raise up our friend from death to life, for he is dying—dying!' She burst into passionate tears, and fell on her knees at his feet.

'Don't, pray don't!' he exclaimed, moving instinctively to raise her. 'Pray spare me—spare yourself.'

He put his arm round her waist, but she shrank from his touch and started to her feet. She was convulsed with feeling.

'You will no longer persecute Saar Gilbert?' she sobbed, again clasping her hands in momentary supplication.

His heart softened and hardened again, for such of his feelings as were not selfish, were evanescent—and he hated the very name of Sir Gilbert.

'Mademoiselle, you are dramatic, and—and—handsome; but I am not in a condition to admire fierce acting, you know,' he observed, after a pause, hatred returning to his eyes.

She turned on him like a fury or a fate.

'You call me an actress, sir? You shall learn that I can act. I have wasted my time hitherto, and I waste it no more. I will set myself the task to avenge my father and Sir Gilbert; and I swear to you that you shall never have the Court while I breathe to prevent it. I will arouse the spirit that haunts the house, and he shall give you no rest; I will engage the widow and orphans of him you rendered homeless, to assist me. I will say to Miss Oreburn that you are a villain, unworthy of a thought; and I will tell to my father that you are hard and cruel as when he died forgiving you. *Mon Dieu!* I can no more.'

The mention of Miss Oreburn once more touched the General.

'You dare not blacken me in Miss Oreburn's estimation,' he exclaimed.

'I dare, and will. I go at once.'

She walked in hasty wrath towards the door, and he followed, as if about to stay her.

'It is snowing. You must stop till the storm passes,' he said involuntarily.

'The weather is like you, sir, cold—cold,' she replied, glancing out of the window at the snow, which was falling thick and fast. 'I accept no hospitality from the persecutor of my father and my benefactor. But I would remind you that, while you spurn that father's child from your door, and harden your heart against her friend, bells are ringing and carols being sung, because this is Christmas Eve. Alas! how *triste* it is! We have formerly been so gay at this happy season, now we are so sad! And you have made us so. Christmas should render us pitiful and loving to all mankind; but you, and indeed I, we cannot love one another.'

There was a sympathetic tone in the last words that touched the General; but Fay gave him no further chance of repentance. She was in the hall when she spoke them, and scarcely had they left her lips before she was hurrying from the house through the gathering snowstorm.

'Stay! stay!' he cried, making a step after her; but the cold drove him back, and the momentary touch of feeling passed away.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A NEW FRIEND IN THE SNOW.

When Fay left the Manor, her face was aglow with contending passions. Anger, shame, sorrow strove within her. She had hoped to soften her uncle and save Sir Gilbert; but she had only, as she conceived, hardened him and degraded herself. She was scarcely conscious of the dense snow as she hurried down the drive, and reached the great iron pillar-supported gates at the lodge. She paused to breathe and to let off the steam of over-boiling passion.

'I shake the snow from my feet at your gates!' she cried, stamping her foot into the snow, and pressing it into her already clogged boots.

'You had better come in and wait, miss,' said the lodge-keeper, opening a door.

'No, I will not wait.'

'Take an umbrella, miss. You will be wet through.'

'No, thank you, I want none.'

She was in the road, breasting the storm, and out of sight, before the woman could bring the umbrella. It was getting dusk, and she had a walk of five miles before her. She was weary, body and mind; but her anger made her unconscious of fatigue, and she breasted the blinding snow and piercing air, heedless that she was wet, chilled, and alone. She had left the Court secretly, because she had heard that threatening letters had arrived by post, and that the steward was worse. She had waited until the arrival of Dr. Hope, to ensure a private interview with her uncle; she had secured it, and what was the result? She had only made him more furious—had perhaps injured the cause of her friends instead of serving them. Her great terror was that they would all be compelled to wander forth into the world, as her father and she had done, seeking a chance living, and dying in poverty. To leave the Court was, to her, to relinquish life.

As she walked resolutely through the snow, her clothes draggled, her face pale, her hands benumbed, she muttered aloud to the inclement elements.

'*L'imbécile! le scélérat! le brute!* He is colder than the snow. What can I do more for my beloveds? He called me dramatic. I will assume the name of Arlington and appear upon the stage. Why not? They say I am a born actress. So shall I *faire fortune*, aid my friends, and expose that man. He is proud, vain, weak, yet he is something like my father. Once his voice pierced my heart, and I could have fallen into his arms and wept; then he grew stern and hard, and I hated him again. Yet is he not altogether bad. Oh, if I were Elinor, I would marry him and save Saar Gilbert. But oh, Fay, does she not want thy *fiancé?* Monsieur Villy! Monsieur Villy! where art thou, that thou comest not to rescue me from the snow? I shall lie down and die, and then, perhaps, *that man* will relent, and all will end happily, as in a fairy tale. Only one poor girl the less in this sad world.'

Blinding tears now came to aid the blinding snow, and Fay could not see her way. She had still four miles to go, and she felt faint with fatigue and hunger. She staggered towards what appeared a snow-heap and sat down. She had a resolute will, and, muttering that she would not swoon like Aimée, began to rub her benumbed hands with snow, having read that people did so in the northern regions. She plucked a large icicle from a neighbouring brier, and put it into her mouth. Possibly the effort restored her, for she did not faint. She got up from the heap of stones on which she found herself, and staggered on, but was soon compelled to sit down again. She reasoned with herself, and told herself night was coming on; but the frost had seized her. 'It is the Erl King,' she said, shuddering as the cold crept through her veins, and her vivid imagination conjured up the knight and his dead child riding 'through the forest so wild,' to escape chill death. She murmured a prayer, and made another effort, and another, to continue her journey. It took her nearly an hour to walk to the next milestone, where, saying wearily, 'Only three miles now,' she sank down, and supported herself against it. She scarcely knew how long she remained there, or whether she fainted or slept; but she was aroused by a shout, and became aware that a carriage with lights pulled up near her. The driver asked her where she was going. She managed to say 'Oaklands Court,' and roused herself; but staggered as she tried to stand.

'What are you doing? Why don't you drive on?' sounded from the carriage, as a window was let down.

'A woman in the snow, sir. She seems half dead. Going your way,' said the driver from his box.

A man jumped out, and, seeing Fay's white face by the lamplight, told her authoritatively to 'get into the fly.' He saw that she could not do it unaided, so he lifted her in, and ordered the driver to go on quickly, and take her to her destination first. It was too dense and cold for parley, so the driver obeyed.

'You are wet through—you are dripping like a waterfall. Let me wrap this rug round you,' said the stranger.

Fay submitted, and was immediately enveloped in a woollen blanket.

'Now take off your hat and put on this fur cap; you are shivering like a leaf. Are you frost-bitten?'

'I—I think so. It is the Erl King,' murmured Fay.

'Nonsense!—you are half frozen to death. Drink some brandy.'

He presented a flask, and put it to her lips.

'I—I hate brandy!' said Fay sleepily.

'So much the better—all women should—but you must drink it. Now let me rub your hands and feet. Can you take off your boots? Impossible? Well, I daresay they are too small, and have those ridiculous high heels.'

'Indeed, they are large, and without heels,' murmured Fay.

'All right. Now, are you getting warm? Yes?—then wrap up your hands and face, and keep so. Here is another rug.'

Fay was already almost smothered, but she was obliged to submit, for she felt that she dared not resist such a voice and manner. The speaker sat down opposite her, and she tried to discover what he was like. The light of the lamps was rendered well-nigh useless by the snow, and both windows were closed, so she had not much success. However, the twofold glimmer that penetrated the misty glass was just enough to reveal a figure much wrapped in overcoat, comforter, and wideawake; a thick brown beard and sharp blue eyes were all she saw of the face. He was also investigating her—not more successfully, for the rugs and fur cap covered all but her great lustrous eyes.

The pair were silent awhile, but at last the stranger again inquired if she were warm, because he said he felt her shiver. She was thankful to be permitted to talk, for silence was even more burdensome than sorrow.

'I am delightfully warm; these furs are of the Esquimaux; but you have deprived yourself of them, and, I fear, will suffer from the cold.'

'I am used to cold, but certainly this is Siberian. Are your Christmas Eves always like this?'

'Oh no! sometimes they are bright with moon and stars, and alive with bells and carols.'

Fay sighed, for her words recalled her grief.

'I hope you have had no unhappy Christmas Eves, and are not in the habit of getting frost-bitten on the occasion?'

'*Ma foi, non*—this is positively the first time. They have been altogether happy hitherto; but, alas! this is most miserable. And you?'

'Well, mine have been usually wild and strange enough. Are we near your home?'

'I think so, but I would not delay you longer. If you tell the man to put me down at the lodge, I can manage the rest.'

The lodge gates had been open, and the fly was already through them, and half-way to the Court.

'I bade him take you to your home. How long had you been exposed to this weather?'

'Two or three hours, I think.'

'Did your friends know you were out alone?'

'No.'

'You are very young. Are you not afraid?'

'I am never afraid. How do you know I am young?—you cannot see me.'

'By your voice, which also tells me you are a lady. You should not have been in the high road alone.'

'You cannot know what affairs took me there.'

'Certainly not, being a stranger; but were I your father or brother'—

'Oh, Monsieur! I have none—only the adopted ones, and they allow me to do as I like. The carriage stops, and I must bid you adieu. A thousand thanks; you have saved my life, as once did Monsieur Villy.'

Fay held out her hand, and the stranger pressed it.

'I hope we may meet again,' he said frankly.

'And I, with my whole heart.'

The door of the carriage opened, and Fay was out and up the steps of the Court before he could reply. He watched her turn and wave her hand, then push open the large doors and enter the hall. Tom was there, and greeted her in a whisper.

'Hush, Ma'mselle, please. Lor, where have you been? You're like a drownded rat, and uncle have gone everywhere to search for you.'

'What is the matter? You look scared,' said Fay, conscious of an unusual stillness.

'Mr. Butterfield is worse, miss, and Mr. Tenderton and Dr. Hope are here, and everybody is up-stairs. The house is dead-like, and then you wasn't here to spirit us up. I'm afraid he've had another stroke and is going.'

The hall doors were still open, and the stranger was watching from the fly-window. The driver stood by.

'Drive on,' he said at last.

'Won't you get out, sir?' asked the man.

'Out? Why?'

'This is Oakwoods Court, sir.'

'The Court! Is it possible?'

He jumped from the carriage, and was in the hall almost at a bound. Fay and Tom started.

'Is Sir Gilbert Oreburn at home?' he asked.

'He is engaged, sir,' replied Tom.

'He will see me, I am sure.'

'Not to-night,' said Fay decidedly.

'Even to-night; for—I am his son.'

'His son! Boykin!'

'Yes; and you?'

'I am Fay.'

She held out both hands, and he took them. Neither spoke for a moment; then she—

'Are you sure? Are you really Boykin? Is it not a dream—a drama?'

'Quite sure. And you are really Fay?'

'Yes.'

'The little French girl who summoned me home?'

'Yes. We have longed for you so; and now you are come, and it is all sad.'

'Why?'

'Because he is—I dare not say the word.'

'Who? What? My father?'

'No; his friend. But we lose the time. Come with me that I restore you to them all, and am the first to tell the good news.'

She took his hand and led him impulsively through the great hall and up the broad staircase. They stood a moment hand-in-hand. Fay's fingers were on her lips as she looked into his eyes and whispered,—

'I will take you to Aimée first. Joy does not kill; but oh, it is pitiful, and a sad welcome home. Are you quite sure you are Boykin?'

'Yes. Are you quite sure you are Fay?'

A bright smile lighted up a handsome face, and two keen, brilliant, decisive eyes gazed into hers. Fay trembled, and heavy tears welled through the veil.

They went down the west corridor to Aimée's room.

'What an inheritance it is!' he said, glancing round.

She opened the door and entered, drawing him after her.

'Aimée, *mon ange*, I bring you a Christmas box. Boykin is come!' she cried.

Aimée started, staggered towards them, and fell into his arms. Fay remained a moment to assure herself that 'joy had not killed,' then passed through Aimée's room to her own, while the words, 'Brother!' 'Sister! Aimée, my darling!' rang in her ears.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DEATH.

FAY throws off her wet garments, unfastens her hair, puts on a white dressing-gown, and steals out into the corridor. She pauses at the steward's door and listens, then falls on her knees and clasps her hands. Her long black hair, still wet with snow, hangs loosely round her; her white face and white arms are uplifted. A faint light from the landing creeps through the long passage, and gleams upon her: just making her figure visible, while all the rest is dark. She listens and prays, prays and listens, for she hears the Vicar's voice; she knows he is reading the prayers for the dying. With breath suspended, hearing intensified, and sight striving to pierce the gloom, she kneels on. She appeals in mute agony to God for him from whom a frail door alone separates her, and asks herself what is this Death, so near, yet so incomprehensible? Her fingers clasp the door-handle, and she thinks, why is she alone at such a moment, when all she loves are watching to see the spirit depart? But she dares not open the door; she would not enter even if she might. The terror of death is on her.

The sound of supplication ceases within. She puts her ear against the door, and hears a sob. She is sure it comes from Sir Gilbert, for she knows every inflection of his voice. She can bear solitude no longer, and thinks she will go in, but the unknown horror stays her. Another sob, a movement, and the door uncloses. She tries to rise, and is met by Maxwell supporting Elinor.

'It is all over. Show me where to take her,' he whispers.

She staggers up, and along the corridor to her own room. Maxwell carries Elinor, who has fainted. Fay, pale and terrified, brings restoratives, and they revive her between them. When she recovers, she sobs hysterically, and, scarcely conscious of her companions, says, 'Go comfort my father!' Maxwell, with a grave, compassionate look, obeys, and leaves her alone with Fay. Fay kneels down by her, and puts her arms round her, in the old tender way.

'Dear Fay, is it you? Where have you been?' asks Elinor dreamily, and Fay bursts into tears. 'Poor child! It is well with him!' continues Elinor, sobbing pitifully herself.

She has never been with Death before, and although what she has witnessed was not terrible, the strange, solemn dread that ever attends the footsteps of the unseen angel is upon her.

'He told me you were so good to him—like a daughter,' sobs Fay.

'He was so true a friend. He lived and died for us. Oh, what shall we do?—what shall we do?' cries Elinor, covering her face with her hands.

'Monsieur Villy will help us now; and, Elinor, *ma mie*, there is another!' exclaims Fay, half eagerly, half fearfully, remembering the returned brother. 'Boykin'—

She checks herself, for she still feels the presence of the unseen reaper and his scythe, and wonders if the soul is garnered.

'What of him, Fay?' cries Elinor, uncovering her face.

'He is here, he is here!' replies Fay, rising impetuously, and opening the door into Aimée's room. 'Come to them, *chérie*.'

Elinor sees a man holding Aimée's hand, and half shrieks. He turns, and she recognises the blue eyes.

'Gilbert!' she cries, and staggers after Fay into the room.

'I have given you to one another,' whispers Fay, as she sees the brother and sister meet. 'Where shall I go now? There is no place for me,' she adds, wandering out into the corridor. 'I cannot pass it,' she mutters, as she approaches the death-chamber, and starts back. 'Ah! there is Saar Gilbert. I go to him!'

She creeps along the corridor with a startled, terrified face, and bounds to the landing. Sir Gilbert is there, yearning, like herself, to be away from death, yet not knowing whither to turn.

'Fay, *ma petite, c'est toi!*' he cries, a mute despair in his voice.

She springs towards him, and falls into his arms, weeping passionately.

'It is my fault—mine!' he murmurs, kissing her, and letting hot tears mingle with hers. 'Be brave, for all our sakes.'

'I will! I will! But oh, I see again the death-bed of my father!' she sobs.

'How cold you are, child! How damp your hair is!' Sir Gilbert shudders.

'Ah! I remember. It has been a dream, but there is one reality—he is here,' she says.

'Hush, Fay! He has gone to his rest—ready, ready; but we are here, and it is my fault—mine!'

Sir Gilbert's self-reproach arouses her.

'The fault is mine; but another supplies his place. Come, that I give him also to you. Boykin is here!'

She takes Sir Gilbert's hand, and draws him towards Aimée's room.

'I cannot see her yet, Fay,' he says, resisting.

'Not her, but him—Boykin!' she insists; and he yields, still not comprehending.

She opens the door gently, and he sees his three children as in a dream. Fay goes to them and whispers,—

'He is in despair, comfort him.'

His son rises with the word 'Father!' on his lips. Another moment, and Sir Gilbert recognises him. Fay hears the words, 'Gilbert, my boy!—I do not deserve this!' She sees the hands clasp, and the two strong men embrace; then turns and leaves them together.

'They do not want me. I have no one,' she murmurs, and hurries, still in terror, down the great staircase.

She hastens from room to room. In the library are Mr. Tenderton and Dr. Hope. She shrinks from the latter as from the bad genius of the house, and turns to the drawing-room, hesitating on the threshold, as she sees a figure by the fire. It is Maxwell, awaiting Sir Gilbert. When she recognises him, she says pathetically, 'Monsieur Villy, may I come in?' and rouses him from a dreamy reverie.

He goes towards her, and takes both her hands.

'Your hands are like'— he begins; but she interrupts with—

'Oh, do not say like that up-stairs!—it is so horrible!'

He takes her to the fire, but she shudders between the chill and the terror.

'Where is he now? I think I saw him in the dark,' she asks, her face blanched, her body trembling.

'He!—who? Sit down and warm yourself.'

'Hush! I mean the spirit. It is so cold, and it snows. Is he here, or out there? When my father went away, it was warm, and the air and sunshine came in at the open window, so that he was free to depart; but to-night it is so late—so dark—so chill!'

She creeps closer to Maxwell.

'God can lay a path of sunbeams through the snow and night for a ransomed soul to tread,' he says reverently.

'Like Jacob's ladder?' she asks appealingly.

'Yes. Now will you lie down?—for you tremble all over, and are like ice. Your dress is thin, your hair damp.'

'Oh yes; I think I have been wet through, and I put on this white,—alas! it must soon be black,—and I have been waiting ever since—waiting for—death! Is it not horrible?'

She begins to sob, and he looks at her pitifully and tenderly.

'It is all too much for you; lie down here,' he says.

He draws a sofa to the fire, and makes her lie down; she smiles gratefully through her tears, and says,—

'This is like when you found me first. You will not leave me? I fear to be alone; I am so strange and cold.'

'Not until Sir Gilbert comes. Where is he?'

'With Boykin.'

'With whom?'

'With his son. Do you know, he picked me up in the snow, and I brought him here and gave him to Aimée, and to Elinor, and to Saar Gilbert. That makes me glad though I see only the spirit. Are you sure it can travel through the white night? What did he say before he went away?'

'He said, "I am going to give an account of my stewardship. Good-bye, Gilbert. God bless you, Elinor, my dear. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and fell asleep.'

'Like Saint Stephen,' says Fay, and breaks into natural tears.

Maxwell sits down near, and lets them have way. Silence succeeds, and soon after she falls asleep, with the word '*Fiancé*' on her lips.

Shortly after, Sir Gilbert came in, followed by his son.

'This is Mr. Maxwell, Gilbert, who has been so good to our poor friend,' he said, by way of introduction, and the young men shook hands. 'Ah, there is Fay, wearied into blessed sleep.'

'She was frightened, and I promised not to leave her till you came, Sir Gilbert,' said Maxwell.

'Right; she is your *fiancée*,' returned Sir Gilbert absently, touching her head lightly.

'She told me she never knew fear,' said his son.

'You! How?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'We picked her up in the snow three miles from here. A strange night for so young a girl to wander in,' replied Mr. Oreburn.

'That is why her hair is damp,' remarked Sir Gilbert, feeling the long locks that fell over the sofa. 'Maxwell, what shall we do without our poor old friend? A ship bereft of rudder, a balloon without ballast, were better able to steer alone than I without Butterfield.'

'You will have Mr. Oreburn now,' replied Maxwell, glancing at the young man.

And a glance was sufficient to show that he was no mean substitute. Gilbert Oreburn, junior, was the reverse of his father in appearance, though also of the fair Saxon type. He was tall, erect, and muscular. His face and hands were bronzed by emigrant life, his brown beard was bushy, his hair thick and wavy. His eyes were clearly blue, like Aimée's, but resolute and penetrating. He seemed not only born but determined to command. Maxwell needed no second look to convince him that the laggard business would no longer stand still if he could help it.

'You suggest that I have Gilbert,' said Sir Gilbert to Maxwell. 'I am thankful. What brought you so soon, my boy?'

'This young lady,' said Mr. Oreburn, pointing to Fay.

'She also summoned me,' said Maxwell.

They all looked at Fay. She lay with one hand under her pale cheek, the other hanging over the sofa. Although her long eyelashes were wet with tears, her crimson lips were parted with a smile. Dreams were kindlier than thoughts, and gentle sleep had soothed the agitated mind. Her wonderful hair fell around her, one lock crossing the arm, another touching the cheek, and finally resting on the carpet. The firelight flickered about her, and night, with her moon and stars, was never more beautiful.

'She thinks she has caused our troubles, but it is I who have ruined my family and killed my friend,' said Sir Gilbert, in a voice so pathetic that his son laid his hand affectionately on his shoulder, and Maxwell exclaimed,—

'Oh, Sir Gilbert, why do you reproach yourself? General Arlington and old age, not you, are to blame.'

'And God is above all,' added Mr. Oreburn gravely.

Sir Gilbert looked at him quickly.

'Right, Gilbert; you teach me the lesson I should teach you,' he said; and Maxwell, seeing that the elder man in his weakness already reposed on the younger in his strength, prepared to leave them.

'Will you pass through the melancholy ordeal of dinner?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'No, thank you; I will come again to-morrow, and you will make what use you like of me,' said Maxwell kindly, and took his departure.

Sir Gilbert went with him to the hall, and Mr. Oreburn remained gazing at Fay. When his father returned, he asked quickly,—

'Why did you call her *fiancée*, father?'

'Did I? Maxwell is her *fiancé*—at least, she styles him so.'

'Are they engaged?'

'I do not know—I hope so; but she is only a child.'

'How old is she?'

'I scarcely remember, time passes so swiftly—sixteen or seventeen, maybe. Fay, *ma petite*, how old art thou?'

'Do not awaken her, father,' said Mr. Oreburn, as Sir Gilbert stooped and kissed her forehead.

'Is he come?' murmured Fay, and half opened her eyes. They met Mr. Oreburn's. 'I have been dreaming, Saar Gilbert. Who is it? Not Boykin?'

Sir Gilbert sat down by her, and said his son was really there.

'How did he come?—did I give him back to you?' she asked, still looking with perplexed eyes at Mr. Oreburn.

'Yes—we met in the snow—do you not remember?' he said.

'Ah, it all returns to me!' she exclaimed, starting up, and beginning to cry. 'Where is Monsieur Villy? He said the spirit had already passed through the snow to God. Is it so, Saar Gilbert?—is it so, Boykin?'

'I hope so, darling. Will you come up-stairs to Elinor and Aimée?'

'I am afraid I might see him,' she shuddered.

'Let me take you. I thought you knew no fear,' said Mr. Oreburn.

'Not of the visible, but invisible,' said Fay, in a whisper, clinging to Sir Gilbert. 'Hark! Do you hear the bells? They are ringing in the Christmas. We used to say our prayers together, and Aimée read them. Let us go to her now.'

She rose, but supported herself with difficulty.

'Let me help you,' said Mr. Oreburn gently.

He and Sir Gilbert took her up-stairs between them, and they found Elinor, Aimée, and Arbiter together, grave but calm.

'We are come to pray in the Christmas. Here is the book,' said Fay, taking up a book of family prayers, as she passed a table, and giving it to Sir Gilbert.

'Read, for I cannot,' he said, putting it into his son's hand, and kneeling down.

Mr. Oreburn read the prayers for Christmas morning reverently, and peace stole over the troubled family.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE DOCTOR IN DOUBT.

No one at the Court knew that Dr Hope slept in the library the night of the steward's death. He was uneasy about Aimée. He had seen her for a few moments, and had found her calm and cold. All that she had said to him was, 'Our friend believes in Christ; all is well with him.' Since his sudden declaration, there had been a change in her manner, imperceptible to all but him. He must undo his thoughtless act, and make her believe in him again. He considered that he had gained entire ascendency over her, either natural or mesmeric, or both; and he would not lose it. Until he had seen her, he had never been roused into acute feeling—never really loved. He had made many women love him,—one especially,—and he was conscious of a power of attraction irresistible to most. He believed, from many unmistakable signs, that Aimée was one of them. He had doubted purity and goodness until he had seen her. He could not realise his feelings, or understand his sufferings, and almost began to question his identity. His acquaintances would have done so also, had they seen him, restless and agitated, and would have asked if this could be the cool, suave, sardonic, unimpressionable Dr. Hope.

He never knew how the night and morning wore through, for he did not attempt to sleep. He reclined, rather, by the dead embers of the fire, till a housemaid came, and begged his pardon for intruding.

'I could not leave until I had heard how Miss Aimée has borne this shock,' he said blandly. 'Would you ask Mrs. Arbiter if I could see her a moment?'

Arbiter and he were allies, united by their dislike of Fay and love for Aimée. She believed in him implicitly, and no sooner heard that he was still in the house than she went to him. She had not been in bed all night, for, as she said, 'What with poor Mr. Butterfield's death, and Mr. Oreburn's return, the family had been frightened out of sleep. Miss Aimée had just dozed off, and the rest were in bed at last. If Dr. Hope would like to look at her before he left, he could do so.'

'I shall not awake her,' he said, creeping noiselessly up-stairs after Arbiter.

But he did awake her, and she looked frightened when she saw him. He soon reassured her, saying that he could not leave with comfort until he had ascertained how she and the other members of her family were. As he stood over her, feeling her pulse and gazing on her, the sensitive girl yielded to his power, and her old trusting manner returned.

'I have tried not to give way,' she said, 'and I think I have succeeded. The return of my dear brother has been as balm in Gilead at this time of sorrow.'

Dr. Hope was astonished at her calmness, which, nevertheless, confirmed his opinion that she would bear real grief better than imaginary.

'If you have any influence with General Arlington, will you use it to delay these proceedings till my dear father recovers a little?' she asked.

'I will do anything if you forgive my presumption,' he replied.

'Not presumption, but—but a mistake,' she said.

He was as far from understanding her as ever; and a knock at the door, precursor of a note from the Manor, prevented a further attempt. General Arlington was ill, and his immediate presence required.

A rapid ride of six miles through frost and snow tended to strengthen Dr. Hope's courage and rouse his ambition; so that by the time he reached the Manor, that goodly property and Aimée were his in perspective. But his patron's reception somewhat damped his ardour. He had one of his nervous attacks, and fancied himself dying. The doctor soon allayed the fear of death, but could not so easily calm his irritability. After Fay left him, he had paced the hall for more than an hour, pausing at intervals to look out at the snow—had abused his servants, sworn at Dr. Hope for his prolonged absence, taken various sedatives, and drunk more wine than usual. The news reached him that Mr. Butterfield was dying, and that Dr. Hope was with him, which only made him more excitable. He kept Stalker, his valet, up half the night, and finally despatched a messenger for the doctor, who found him in bed and angry. When he heard that Mr. Butterfield was dead, he said wrathfully,—

'Well, now he is gone, poor old man, I suppose you will be no longer wanted at the Court. If I am to be neglected, I shall have another medical man. You are not the only clever doctor in the world, and money can buy both men and medicine, you know.'

'Money purchases everything but affection, General. You may get a hundred physicians, but not one who really cares for you and understands you as I do.'

'You are quite sure that poor Butterfield's complaint was not the same as mine? What did that girl mean by saying I had caused his death?'

'What girl? But pray do not excite yourself. If you will sleep first, I have much to tell you; and be assured that your illness arises from a sensitive organisation, whereas Mr. Butterfield's constitution was like iron.'

'His death has made me quite nervous, you know, Septimus, and I can't sleep; so pray sit down and talk to me. You must make your choice between me and the Court; for if you take up your abode there, you needn't come here, you know.'

'I will never go there again if it displeases you; but I could not well refuse to attend an old friend,' said the doctor, sitting down and assuming patience.

'He was not your only patient, you know. That sick girl, Aimée, takes up more of your time than I do, and if that continue, I shall get another medical man, you know.'

'My dear General, I would rather neglect my own mother than you,' groaned the doctor.

'I think you are fond of me, and, till those Oreburns turned up, you were quite devoted. They have destroyed our peace, and now we will destroy theirs—unless, indeed, Miss Oreburn'—

'They are in trouble enough,' interrupted the doctor.

'Are they? I am very glad. *That girl* had the impertinence to come here and browbeat me. By Jove! if she had not been so bold, I should have admired her, she is so handsome. Not like Miss Oreburn, you know, but a sort of Siddons, or Rachel, or Grisi, or one of those actresses, but impudent as a Billingsgate. I couldn't acknowledge such a person, you know, and'—

'I should think not. She must be got rid of somehow.'

'Don't interrupt me, Septimus; you are getting quite set up with your increasing reputation. I was going to say that if—if, in short, *as* I was saying, Miss Oreburn could be induced, you know'—

'Yes, General, I understand; but I am sorry to say I think Sir Gilbert has an entire ascendency over her.'

'You didn't speak to him! What business had you?'

'Now, my dear sir, be calm and listen. I took an early opportunity of sounding Miss Oreburn, as you requested. I merely said you had begged me to ask her if there were any chance of her changing her mind on a subject you had named to her.'

'Yes. What did she say? You are as pedantic as a schoolmaster.'

'I do not wish to give you pain. She said that she must abide by her father's decision, but had not forgotten her promise.'

'There it is—I told you so. It is her father's fault, and, by Jove! he shall suffer. If I can't get her, you know, I shall make you—hem!—my—you know.'

'Yes, General?' said the doctor inquiringly, rubbing his hands soothingly.

'What did you say about getting rid of that girl? She is awfully handsome and pathetic, you know. If only one was sure of her birth, one might—but no, I could never acknowledge her—never. But we mustn't harm her, you know.'

'Certainly not. They say Maxwell is in love with her, and she makes strong love to him; she is, as you say, bold as brass. If she has been here, I do not wonder at this dangerous attack. Her sort of manners would bring one on infallibly.'

'You don't say so! Forbid her the house—forbid everybody the house, in short, while I have these palpitations; but, if you will promise never to leave me, I will—you know.'

'Yes, General?'

'I think I shall make my will.'

'Ha!—a wise resolution.'

'Why? Do you think I'm going to die?'

'By no means; you are wonderfully improved in health.'

'Then will you continue your care of it as unremittingly as you did when abroad, and undertake all my affairs, public and private, and keep off disagreeable people and unpleasant news; and then I may—you know—you understand?'

'Scarcely; but I should be ungrateful not to devote myself to you, who have been so good to me.'

'You will give up the Oreburns, root and branch?'

'There my professional reputation would be implicated if I left suddenly. One must keep up appearances.'

'Say you are engaged as my family physician.'

'I would rather withdraw gracefully.'

'What do you mean?—in a carriage and four?'

'Not exactly; but, as I have been their medical attendant for some years, I might ask your permission to visit the youngest daughter, when sent for.'

'You promise not to go unless they send for you, and I give you leave?'

'Well, ye-es—I promise.'

'Then I will send for Customs in a day or two, and make my will. Are you sure it will not hasten my end?'

'Not if done with quiet and deliberation. It is hurry that kills.'

'You are right—you are always right, Septimus, and I really think I shall do best not to marry; the hurry might kill me. One would have to go abroad, and receive and return visits—in short, as I was saying, I am, perhaps, best off as I am after all, you know. But you—I daresay you will marry. What of Lizzie Maxwell? You used to admire her.'

'I have had neither time nor inclination to think of marriage, and now I shall make *you* my wife, General.'

'Ha, ha! not such a bad idea. I suppose you wouldn't like that—that girl—that Mademoiselle? Do you think she will tell everybody who she is? I suppose you wouldn't like to marry her, Septimus?'

'I!—I would as soon marry one of the furies.'

'Ah, I thought so; but I hope I frightened her out of fulfilling her threat. 'Pon my soul, if she does, I shall leave the country, and you will have to accompany me. I can't see why I am to be the victim of all those people, and I so nervous. It is too bad—too bad! But we'll have our revenge, Septimus—ha, ha!—we'll have our revenge!'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

DECISION AT LAST.

DURING the week that succeeded Mr. Butterfield's death, Sir Gilbert and his family maintained a strict privacy. Mr. Oreburn's arrival served in some sort to avert Sir Gilbert's self-reproaches, and to enliven his sisters and Fay; but the sunshine of his presence could not disperse the shadow that had fallen over the Court. However, the quiet and the leisure gave him time to resume the old relations with his family, and to become acquainted with Fay. Ten years of emigrant life had changed the stripling to the man, and Sir Gilbert and his daughters could scarcely realise that the handsome, resolute Mr. Oreburn of seven-and-twenty, was the Gilbert who had parted from them in France at seventeen.

Sir Gilbert would discuss no business matters while his steward's remains were in the house. He had a morbid dread of saying or hearing anything that might have troubled that faithful friend's soul, were he living, and begged his son to restrain his natural anxiety concerning the difficulties that had brought him from America, until after the funeral.

Fay was not well. She had taken cold from her exposure to the snowstorm, and this, together with her other sad surroundings, depressed her usually buoyant spirits, so that Mr. Oreburn's was but a melancholy welcome to the home he had left when an infant. But he was not daunted. He appointed a meeting with Maxwell in the village, and made himself master of the affairs. He came to a rapid decision on all points, though he did not at once declare it openly.

Sir Gilbert and he attended Mr. Butterfield's funeral as chief mourners, and a long train of tenants followed. The steward was universally respected, and, if reckoned hard, was counted honest. When his will was read, it was found that he had left all he possessed to Miss Oreburn. The wording was short and to the purpose. He made her his heir, because he believed her a good daughter and a wise woman.

Mr. Moneypenny was named as trustee, and in this capacity, much against his inclination, felt himself constrained to go to the Court, after the funeral, for the reading of the will. Sir Gilbert's courteous manners thawed his pride a little, but did not detain him longer at the Court than was absolutely necessary. Sir Gilbert said afterwards that he was 'starched as his shirt-collar;' still he liked him better than he expected, and was surprised to find his 'Tyrian' a gentleman, if a crusty one—'like old port,' as he expressed it. Mr. Moneypenny told Elinor that she might claim his services, if necessary, but that he supposed his nephew would supply all demands. Elinor thanked him, without understanding the cut at Maxwell.

She, as well as her father, was much overcome by Mr. Butterfield's will. His possessions were not large. Green Oaks Cottage, in which he and his father before him had lived, was his own, and built on land once belonging to the Court. It had an orchard, paddock, and a valuable field attached to it. What money he and his father before him had saved was invested in mortgages on the Oakwoods property; and it was gradually evolved that they had received no interest for it. This fact served to increase Sir Gilbert's depression and Elinor's gratitude. The bequests were so tied up as to prevent their ever again going from the family.

'We shall have at least a home,' was Elinor's first thought, when they told her she was an heiress.

A day or two after the funeral, Maxwell came to the Court, and had an interview with Sir Gilbert, Mr. Oreburn, and Elinor. Mr. Oreburn was not long in announcing the decision he had come to. A few words from Maxwell concerning the pressing nature of the demands made by General Arlington brought the resolute words—

'We must cut off the entail.'

'You echo the wish that has been "father to my thoughts" for years,' said Sir Gilbert, who was standing with his back to the library fire, stroking Fay's cat, asleep on a chair close by.

'Do you mean this?' asked the son.

'Your interests have alone prevented my saying so before,' replied Sir Gilbert.

'Our interests are identical, father, and can in no wise be served by living enslaved to any man. Better to be penniless than be fettered body and soul as we have been for generations.'

'Well said. To be professedly free, yet for ever fretting under the yoke, is worse than slavery,' echoed Sir Gilbert.

'Then we are agreed, Mr. Maxwell. You can prepare the deeds, and we will sign, seal, and deliver. Then we shall be free,' said Mr. Oreburn.

His father walked to the window.

'Free! One breathes at the word. But must it all go, Maxwell?' he asked.

'What is the all, father?' said his son, following. 'A few acres of land and water, which we may treble in America.'

'And the past with its associations!' sighed Sir Gilbert.

'They are in France, father,' said his son. 'Surely you have dearer memories there than here.'

'I had, my son; but I am living my boyhood over again. However, you decide as I have longed to do; indeed, you embody all the decision those who preceded you ought to have had. How can you carry so much?'

'Nothing weighs me down but debt or dishonour.'

'Then we are agreed to sever this intricate Gordian knot, Maxwell,' said Sir Gilbert. 'I should rejoice but for my children and the memory of my friend. What would Butterfield say?'

A shadow of the old smile flitted over his face.

'He would never have consented,' said Maxwell.

'Then all is for the best, since we cannot pain him by contradiction,' remarked Mr. Oreburn.

'But what is the opinion of our best of stewardesses concerning this Alexandrian obstacle?' asked Sir Gilbert, looking at Elinor, who was sitting opposite, paler than ever in her deep mourning.

'I would do as Alexander did, and cut the knot,' she replied, in a clear, low voice.

'All *d'accord?* Then the wide world and poverty for us, and Oakwoods and riches for the General.'

'Not so, father. I have my nuggets, and my farm in the backwoods, which are neither entailed nor mortgaged,' put in Mr. Oreburn.

'And we have Green Oaks Cottage, dear papa, and the mortgages Mr. Butterfield held,' said Elinor, half sadly, half playfully.

'And, Sir Gilbert,' added Maxwell, with hesitation, 'my uncle, and not the General, is mortgagee for Great Oaks Farm, and bids me say that he does not mean the General to have it.'

'One at a time,' said Sir Gilbert, passing his hand before his eyes. 'Poverty, did I say? I, like Cornelia, have my jewels. I am rich indeed!'

His voice quivered, and Elinor was instantly at his side. He put his arm round her waist and kissed her forehead.

'May I come in? I want Villy, *mon chat*,' sounded suddenly at the door, and Fay appeared, her cheerfulness restored.

She took up her slumbering cat, and lingered. She guessed what had been the subject of discussion, and asked unhesitatingly if they were going to sell the Court. Mr. Oreburn replied promptly that they were.

'Was it for this I recalled you, Monsieur?' she cried, turning to him. 'To give your father's possessions to the wicked General, and render your sisters homeless? No, indeed. While I live he shall never have the Court. What I said to good Mr. Butterfield on his bed of death, and to *that man* in his palace, I maintain. He fears that I shall declare myself his niece, and I will do it. I am now of age to understand that I must have relations somewhere, and I will find them, if I wander over the world. When I have no longer money, I shall sing through the streets, for even Elinor confesses that I sing the ballads with *éclat*.'

'And what if you find your relations, Mademoiselle?' asked Mr. Oreburn.

'I shall make the bargain with my amiable uncle to sell them for the Court.'

'I do not understand.'

'I shall say, "Destroy the mortgages, and I bury my relations in oblivion." Monsieur Villy, I have patched up the letter, and will take it and my photographs to France. Meanwhile, will you promise, Mr. Oreburn, not to cut off the entail?'

She stood glancing from one young man to the other.

'That is already settled; and the sooner it is accomplished the better,' said Mr. Oreburn decidedly.

'*Ma foi*, you are not the Boykin I expected!' she exclaimed naïvely.

'What might he have been?' asked Mr. Oreburn.

'Saar Gilbert said he was thin, plain, young, smooth, with the *nez retroussé*, red hair, and submissive even to Arbitère, which I ought to be.'

'That was certainly complimentary. How do you find him?'

'The opposite. He is resolute, and would command the world. But he sells not the Court. Let him be assured of that. I too have the will of my own.'

'Where is the letter you have mended, Mademoiselle?' asked Maxwell.

'I will fetch it while you continue the affairs,' she replied.

She disappeared. Mr. Oreburn remarked that it seemed strange that General Arlington's version of her history should have been considered conclusive, and that no one should have made inquiries on her side.

'We were only too thankful for rest,' said Sir Gilbert.

Fay returned with the letter. She had managed to make a tolerably readable missive of the scraps which Maxwell had asked her to gum together. She laid it before him. It was in French, and in the writing of a woman. Maxwell was not ready at French, and he passed it to Elinor, who, aided by her brother and Fay, made out enough to show that the writer must have been the mother of Fay's mother. This seemed proved by her having preserved the scraps in her work-box, by the recurrence of the words *Félicité*, *mère*, *fille*, and *désobéissante*, and by the maternal malediction preceding the signature.

'It is written by a lady, in spite of strong language. What is her name?' said Mr. Oreburn.

He took the paper to the window, and, after patient examination, said it was more like De Marimon than anything else.

'Impossible. The De Marimons were our old neighbours in Brittany,' said Sir Gilbert.

'Not likely, certainly; but worth inquiring into,' said Mr. Oreburn significantly. 'If you will delay your *début* as ballad-singer, Mademoiselle, until I go to France, I will save you the pain of making it.'

'I shall accompany you, is it not, Sir Gilbert? Let us depart to-morrow. The letter is from *la grand'mère.* We find her, and circumvent the General,' said Fay.

'That is the sort of activity I like,' observed Mr. Oreburn. 'I hate standing still; though a polite policeman did order me to "move on," when I was surveying Liverpool. Certainly my "welcome home" has not been rapturous.'

Sir Gilbert was examining the letter, which had been so many years in his house; Maxwell was pondering possibilities, and thinking of the next move; while Mr. Oreburn and Fay continued an animated discussion as to which should set out for the Continent to prosecute inquiries concerning her relations.

'It would be strange if, after all, Fay should be of that old Marquise's family,' whispered Sir Gilbert. 'There were no daughters.'

'She personally resembles them,' put in Mr. Oreburn, who had heard all that was said.

'Every Frenchwoman is like every other Frenchwoman,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Given large black eyes, a wide mouth, and a nose slightly celestial, like a Chinese shoe, and you have them all.'

'*Grand merci*, Saar Gilbert!' cried Fay, sweeping a curtsey. 'You paint what I daily see in my mirror, to the life. I would be more original, but nature and my nation are against me.'

Sir Gilbert left the room, and the young people, scarcely understanding how much he felt the impending changes, began immediately to discuss what would please him best, and, so doing, forgot their personal feelings and interests.

CHAPTER XL.

A FIGHT FOR DOCUMENTS.

MAXWELL was obliged to go to London, for he had a cause coming on which demanded his particular attention. He wished to see Elinor alone before his departure, in order that he might give her General Arlington's message; so he managed to detain her a few minutes after the discussion mentioned in the last chapter.

'I believe Sir Gilbert wishes you to have possession of the keys, which are already yours,' he began abruptly. 'Your brother says he will undertake the business during my unavoidable absence, and spare you; but you are mistress of the cottage.'

Elinor sighed, as she said,—

'Deeds and parchments again ! When will it be over ?'

'To-morrow, if Mr. Oreburn's will is law,' replied Maxwell.

'I will take the keys if you wish it,' said Elinor ; and Maxwell relieved his pocket of the weight of the bunch, and gave them to her. 'Is there anything else I should do ?'

'I will communicate with you or—or—your brother,' replied Maxwell ; 'but General Arlington gave me a message for you a long time ago, which I have never delivered.'

'Another !' exclaimed Elinor haughtily ; and Maxwell saw that her manner changed.

'It was only a question, or I would not have borne it,' he said, meeting her eye. 'He wanted to know if you had authorised Sir Gilbert's letter?'

Maxwell grew confused. He saw by her look and manner that there was something in the letter which was not to be confided to the lawyer, while she was surprised and annoyed at his being the bearer of such a message, supposing that he knew its import.

'I have already sent General Arlington a reply to that question, through Dr. Hope,' she said coldly ; and thus their private interview ended.

But not so Elinor's perplexities. She and Mr. Oreburn were soon deep in the affairs, and Butterfield's iron safe was the scene of more researches.

One morning Fay appeared in the office, demanding her portion of the contents of the safe—the Aigret letters. It was long before they turned up. She was standing between Gilbert and Elinor, when she and Gilbert saw at the same moment a packet labelled 'Copies of letters of Messrs. Aigret, Paris, and minutes concerning Miss Fay.' They both laid their hands upon it, but she secured it.

'Let us read it first, Fay,' said Gilbert, dreading the contents.

'These are my own, and I claim them of right,' she replied. 'It is time that I should know what they say of me.'

Elinor, who had waded through the correspondence with Mr. Butterfield, and copied such letters as he deemed necessary, entreated Fay to yield ; but she was resolute, and said she would take the packet home and study it.

She left the cottage instantly, and Gilbert followed her, determined to prevent her diving into its doubtful information, if possible.

'You had better confide your documents to me, Fay,' he began, as they walked rapidly along the road. 'I am soon going to France, and can see Aigret and make inquiries.'

'I prefer to read what they say of me and my father myself, if you will allow me. I see not why you, a stranger, should intermeddle.

If I confided the paper to another, it would be to Monsieur Villy; but he is in London, delaying everything by his absence.'

'Why to him?—and why do you call him Villy?—ridiculous name!'

'Because I depend on him, and he is my *fiancé*.'

'Your *fiancé* seems too deep in law to attend to you. Is he your affianced, Mademoiselle?'

'Since these seven years.'

'Are you absolutely engaged?'

'Why do you ask? You know what affianced means in French.'

'I do; but it is not usual, now-a-days, to be affianced at ten years' old. Did he propose for you, or you for him?'

'I think it was I.'

'Then you were fast before your time. Do you consider yourself engaged?—I mean affianced?'

'Of course. Am I not his *fiancée?*'

'Pshaw! he is too old and grave for you; he might be a hundred.'

'I sometimes think so.'

'Are you sure he is in love with you?'

'What a question! I never asked him.'

'But, Fay, if I were in love with you, I should not wait to be asked; I should tell you.'

'Ah, you! *ma foi!*—you are so different.'

They both laughed at this naïve reply, and Mr. Oreburn's piercing blue eyes met Fay's animated black ones. A dangerous meeting indeed!

'I am an Oreburn, and have more right to help you than a pettifogging lawyer,' he said. 'I would go to the world's end to serve you.'

'Ah, that is what Napoléon le Petit says; but I do not believe him.'

'Who is he? I thought it was all over with the Napoleonic dynasty now. If you will confide your documents to me, I might be of use. Surely you wish to establish your parentage?'

'I wish to be a Saint Ange, not an Arlington—I hate the name!' she exclaimed proudly.

'But as an Arlington you might help my father.'

'Do you mean that, being *that man's* niece, I could serve Sir Gilbert? Then I am ten thousand times an Arlington!'

'What a deep, strong heart you have, Fay!' exclaimed Gilbert.

'How do you know it is deep and strong?'

'I knew it when you took me to my father and sisters—when you said you would shoot your enemy, were you a man—when you sobbed and trembled at the funeral—and I shall know it for ever.'

Gilbert said this with the clear voice of decision that had sounded in Fay's ears the first time she saw him, and had rung through them, like bells, ever since. She could not get his tones out of her head, they were so bold and sweet. She thought if a sweet, low voice is a delightful thing in woman, a sweet, audible, ringing, decisive voice was a grand thing in man.

'A thousand thanks! I am wild, strange, passionate, revengeful—they tell me so, and I know it; but I like to hear you say I have the heart deep and strong. I think perhaps you are right. But you do not know me yet as do Elinor and Arbitère. They have seen how bad I am.'

'I am content to make your acquaintance as you are.'

'Ah, but you know me not. I was a veritable demon when Angel Aimée exorcised me. I have been wicked to Elinor, who has been so good to me. I have sought to annoy Arbitère, and torment the other domestics. I have ridiculed the neighbours — even good Mrs. Tenderton. I have hated General Arlington and Dr. Hope, and I hate them still.'

'Had I not been in the backwoods, I might have done the same,' said Mr. Oreburn, smiling. 'Then I longed only for some one to love. Here this General seems simply contemptible, for he who persecutes his fellow from private grudge is beneath wholesome hate.'

Fay stopped, and glanced at Mr. Oreburn's proud, handsome, disdainful face.

'You are grander and greater than I,' she said. 'When I hate, I hate!'

'And when you love, you love. Is it so?' he asked, looking at her.

'Perhaps—I scarcely know. I loved *mon père*—and loved'—

Tears came into her eyes, but she dashed them away.

'And my father, my sisters, Maxwell?' he said eagerly.

'Ah, yes, I love them too. But it is not the same, except possibly Saar Gilbert—I love him as, formerly, my father.'

'Not Maxwell, your *fiancé?* Do you not love him best?'

'Why do you question me thus, Boykin? You have not the right.'

Her tone changed to indignant protest, and she hurried on.

'Forgive me, Mademoiselle. I am grown uncouth from my uncivilised life. Will you tame me, and teach me polite manners?'

'It would be the lioness taming the lion,' she said; and her laugh rang through the park-lands.

Fancying he had gained an advantage, he asked for the packet.

'*Ma foi*, you are persevering, Monsieur; but you obtain not the victory over me. We have just agreed that I shall conquer you, on the contrary, and such shall be my endeavour henceforth. I read my papers myself, then I may take them to France, and pursue my own inquiries, for I shall go, be assured. I have the *entrée* of a respectable *maison de charité* in London, and of an excellent hotel at Dinan. I remember still many things, and if they consider it imprudent for me to accompany you, I go alone.'

'There is safety in candour. We know your movements,' he said, piqued in spite of himself.

'I can be reticent, sir. I am silent till we reach the house, in order to convince you of my endurance.'

She set her face resolutely, and walked rapidly on. Instead of keeping to the road, she cut across the grass, Mr. Oreburn following, and attempting to draw her again into conversation.

'As you will,' he said at last, finding his attempts vain. 'I too have learned to hold my tongue, like a monk of La Trappe.'

She looked at him and laughed, but he carried his head high, and swung along by her side in silence, until they reached the Court.

'He is offended,' she thought, as they entered the hall. 'What matters? He thinks to rule the world.'

She ran up-stairs, and, when she reached the landing, turned, and held up her packet. He was looking after her, and, hoping that she would yet give him the papers, followed her, taking three steps at a time. He was at her side, his hand on the packet. Surprised and offended, she wrenched it angrily from him, uttered an indignant 'Pardon, Monsieur,' ran down the corridor, and disappeared into her apartment.

'Perhaps she will not understand them,' he muttered, as he returned to the hall, and thence to the cottage, to consult Elinor.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE FIRST PRIMROSES.

WHILE the principal personages of this story were moved by a thousand anxieties, and the minor moralists, *i.e.* the village gossips, drew their conclusions, Aimée alone was calm. Although her health had suffered, and she was again confined to couch and easy-chair, her spirit was tranquil and cheerful. Her friends gathered round her for rest after the anxieties of business, and Sir Gilbert, especially, seemed to find consolation in talking to her. Had Dr. Hope seen her, he would have misdoubted his power over her; for, although she was secretly pained by his absence, she excused it, and gave no sign of regret. She believed that he kept away because she had discouraged him, and feared, in her innocence, that he was offended with her. But when such thoughts crowded upon her, she dispersed them by prayer—prayer for him who, while loving her madly, still leagued himself with her father's enemy.

It was in Aimée's room that Mr. Oreburn and Fay first met again, after their encounter in the corridor. He found her, his father, and sisters together there, and paused on the threshold to look at them. Aimée, pillowed up in her chair, was putting some finishing touches to Fay's likeness, resumed for the first time since Mr. Butterfield's death. Sir Gilbert, in a rocking-chair by the fire, was reading aloud *L'Avare* of Molière, and Elinor was on a low stool at his feet, working. What a pretty, bright, homely picture it seemed to the young backwoodsman!

'Try to look more cheerful, dear Fay,' said Aimée.

'I cannot,' replied the girl, whose countenance was strangely dramatic.

Her hands rested listlessly on her cat's back, her eyes were fixed on her robin, now hopping in its cage on Aimée's table and being reproduced in the picture, and her slight figure drooped.

'Don't let me interrupt you,' said Gilbert, going to Aimée's side, and looking from the portrait to the original.

Fay's pale face grew crimson. She averted her eyes, and Gilbert feared she had understood the papers. He left Aimée, and, taking a chair near her, began quietly to stroke her cat. She did not speak or look at him, but let her hands drop at her sides.

'It is of no use. You have lost the old expression!' said Aimée sadly.

Fay was about to rise, but Gilbert detained her.

'Try again, Aimée. It is such a lovely picture,' he said.

Sir Gilbert put down his book, and contemplated his children.

'It is a lovely picture, and it seems a pity to alter it. But scenes fade like the memory of words. I have a proposal to make,' he said, leaning back in his chair.

All eyes were turned upon him. There was something peculiar in his manner, although it was apparently careless as ever.

'I see you give me your attention, and look as if a proposal from me were a rare occurrence. I shall never make it if you gaze at me so.'

'Yes, dear father,' said Elinor, continuing her work.

'It is settled that we must leave this place,' he resumed. 'Gilbert and Fay have arranged that matter. Do not be indignant, Fay. You know you recalled our umpire, and he has decided wisely. I have just a gleam of ancestorial pride left in my opaque breast, which will enable me to see my way out of the Court and into the Cottage.

Elinor, may we quit before the gleam fades, and we are turned out in the dark?'

'I do not understand you, dear father,' said Elinor, glancing at him.

'We have gone through so many vicissitudes together that a change more or less will not greatly affect us,' he continued. 'We returned to retrench; but the Fates are as usual against us, and we cannot draw in enough at the Court, in spite of your praiseworthy efforts, *ma fille*. *L'Avare*, of whom we have been reading, has his grip on us, but has not added us to his money-bags as yet. Before he does so, and while we are independent, will you invite us to your *cottage orné*, and promise not to tire of us till Great Oaks Farm be ready, which, by the kind permission of the Moneypenny, is still ours?'

Elinor turned round quickly, letting her work drop, crossed her hands on her father's knee, and looked inquiringly into his face.

'Dearest father, all that was so generously bequeathed to me is yours. Dispose of it as you will. We shall be happy anywhere with you.'

Sir Gilbert laid his hand on her head.

'Then we may leave our country for our town residence at any moment. And since Gilbert has come down upon the entail with the decision born with him, and the General—*the* General *par excellence*, truly, for us—takes possession of the Court, with the ambition born with him—it may be well to remove to the gaieties of our Athens at once.'

'I scarcely yet understand you, dear father,' said Elinor.

'You must hide my diminishing locks somewhere, *ma fille*,' he said, stroking her fair hair, 'and they may as well lie *perdus* in your abode as another's. As I understand our good friend's testament, we should be unmolested in the home he has left us.'

Sir Gilbert's voice quivered.

'Yes, father,' said Elinor reassuringly.

'Then, if no one object, we will retire to this refuge,' he added, glancing round.

'I had thought of London,' suggested Mr. Oreburn.

'Truly a large, if not a fair haven. No; I would rather lessen my life's links in the country if I may, though the space be comparatively narrow. Hired houses are wearisomely cumbersome. Let us visit our heiress until the lease of Great Oaks Farm fall in, when we may become gentlemen farmers, and farm our own estate. Will our hostess prepare for our reception?'

He stooped to kiss Elinor's forehead, and so concealed some emotion that his voice betrayed.

'Certainly, dear father,' she replied, taking his hand and stroking it fondly.

'And what does my Aimée say?' resumed Sir Gilbert, recovering composure.

'I shall like the change much, *petit papa*. I shall be less tired in those small rooms than in these,' replied Aimée bravely.

'And you, my son?' he continued, meeting Mr. Oreburn's resolute eyes.

'The sooner we leave the temptations and associations of this place the better, father; and the move should be made before compulsion comes.'

'You jump with my thoughts, Gilbert. I rejoice that the gold-fever has not destroyed your chivalry. May we walk down to your mansion, Elinor, without the parade of anger or sorrow—putting on the appearance of choice? People will suppose you are embellishing your house, and we are viewing the improvements. Then they will awake to the remarkable fact that your guests have arrived, even before you are yourself at home. We are told that it is a sign of power to grow old gracefully; it is certainly a test of metal to grow poor gracefully. I daresay we shall like it, eh, Fay?'

Sir Gilbert turned round to look at Fay, who had been moving restlessly, and glancing from one to the other, during the conversation. She rose, laid one hand on Sir Gilbert's shoulder, and extended the other towards his son.

'I shall never like it. That man shall never come here!' she cried. 'Would you both present the Court to our enemy?'

'If it please him to accept it, in lieu of the tens of thousands we owe him,' said Mr. Oreburn.

'Never! never!' exclaimed Fay.

'One moment, if you will permit me, Fay,' interrupted Sir Gilbert quietly. 'I have a few words more to say.'

Fay stood, with glowing cheeks and indignant eyes, facing Mr. Oreburn, and restraining her passionate speech.

'I wish you all to believe that, although I may suffer somewhat in again leaving this old place and renouncing it for ever, I am personally thankful that the long struggle after a chimera is over. But I grieve on your accounts, and especially on Gilbert's. Still I hope our ancestors are more faulty than we, and will share our burdens when we make up the long account. Oh, how sadly fatiguing all these accounts are! Elinor, it is for you to wind them up at your Tusculum.'

Sir Gilbert's manner changed, as by an effort, from unusual gravity to its customary *insouciance;* but all present understood it well. Elinor kissed the hand she still held; Aimée whispered, '*Pauvre petit papa;*' and Gilbert rose involuntarily, exclaiming,—

'It is best for me to work, father—inheritance is idleness.'

'Silence, all of you!' burst forth Fay, stepping forth and facing him. 'I have brought the pain, and will pay the penalty. Say that you will not sell the Court, not cut off this abominable entail, not pay those *maudits mortgages*, until I have established my—my—*mon Dieu!* aid me to explain myself and assist my benefactors! Until I have terrified that man by proclaiming myself, and discovering my relations. Monsieur Villy affirms that the Manor is mine if—if—*O Ciel!* oh, Saar Gilbert!—I have the papers. I understand the machinations of my father's enemies, those French advocates, the villainy of the General and the doctor, the aspersions on my father and mother. Gilbert, Boykin, you promised to aid me—promise to wait—wait until we have visited France, and found out the truth. If you will not wait, I go again to the General, I face him, I tell all the world that— *Oh, mon père! mon père!*'

She clasped her hands, and Gilbert took them, standing, as he was, close beside her. She snatched them away passionately.

'I promise to go to France, and to take you, if necessary,' he said, fixing his eyes upon her. 'But were you to inherit the Manor to-morrow, you could not save us.'

'That is false, for the mortgages would be mine!' she cried. '*Bon Dieu! mon père!* help me, teach me!' She upraised her eyes.

'Fay, we are verging on the dramatically sensational,' interrupted Sir Gilbert. 'While the amiable uncle lives, we are all powerless. Let us be thankful for temporary irresponsibility.'

'Thankful for ruin and dishonour! Never! I swear to avert them! If Mr. Oreburn choose to give up his birthright, like Jacob, I do not. Ah, Saar Gilbert, I see by your face that you have the repartee on the point of the tongue, but'— Fay paused to look at him.

'I was about to remark that we shall have no mess of pottage to console us,' said Sir Gilbert, with his old manner.

'*Ma foi*, they are inconceivable!' resumed Fay, shrugging her shoulders. 'Saar Gilbert loses all and laughs; Boykin throws away his inheritance; Elinor and Aimée submit; I alone resolve. I must act while you all sleep. Permit me to pass, Mr. Oreburn.'

In another moment she had left the room. She ran to her apartment, and wrote in broad, scrawling characters, the following note:—

'SIR,—You fulfil your threats, I fulfil mine.

'FÉLICITÉ GABRIELLE DE SAINT ANGE.'

She directed it to General Arlington, and was soon on her way to the village to post it.

'I will also go and inform Miss Whiston and Mrs. Owler of my relationship to him,' she muttered. 'It will be "something accomplished, something done." They are all *fainéants* here, as were the sluggard kings. Even Boykin is a coward.'

She had not gone far, when she heard his voice, crying imperatively, 'Stop, Fay! I want to speak to you.'

She hurried on all the faster, but he overtook her.

'Where are you going in such haste?' he asked.

'I shall not tell you. I am unhappy, and desire to be alone,' she replied.

'We are all unhappy; but solitude will not enliven us. Allow me to walk with you.'

'I am pursuing my own affairs, sir, and would rather be alone. May one not be one's own mistress for an hour? You are about to accomplish the ruin of your family, and I go to circumvent you. We will not be commanded by—by a wild bushranger such as you!'

'Pray do not walk and talk so fast. I must know why you left us so suddenly, and whither you are going.'

'I am neither Catholic nor Anglican that I should need a confessor. You rule your family, but will not govern me.'

'I would not attempt so impossible a task; still, I must know where you are going. When I picked you up in the snow, you had been on a useless errand. I believe you are bent on another.'

He laid his hand on her arm, and stayed her rapid steps. Their eyes met.

'What right have you to question me?' she exclaimed indignantly, crimson with some emotion. 'You would have seized my papers—you would now control my actions—you who have known me but a few months.'

'To my cost,' he murmured, letting go her arm.

Fay paused. The words sounded strange to her.

'You are bent on avenging my father,' he added coldly. 'You will not effect this by exposing yourself; you will distress him, exasperate General Arlington, and make yourself unhappy. You must not do it—you shall not!'

'Shall not!' she exclaimed passionately. 'I must and will! I can live no longer under false pretences. I will declare my name and parentage to the world, and leave the rest to the good God, who is the Father of the fatherless.' Her voice quivered, and, as Gilbert replied, his softened.

'You are bent on this errand now; you are too truthful to say no,' he said.

'I am not truthful. I would tell a thousand lies, to save Saar Gilbert!' she cried passionately.

'Oh, Fay!' exclaimed Gilbert, turning away from her.

'Why not, sir? It is you who prevent me from telling the truth,' she said, staying him.

'Silence is not falsehood, but discretion,' he said.

'I hate discretion—it has ruined us all! Elinor is discreet—Aimée is discreet—Dr. Hope is discreet. What have they done? Stemmed the torrent, to let it burst fifty times as fiercely. Saat Gilbert is not discreet, and he is worth you all. You, who give up your possessions, to talk of discretion! It is too ridiculous—ha, ha!'

The idea was so absurd that Fay laughed, and Gilbert took advantage of the diversion.

'It *is* ridiculous, I daresay,' he said hotly; 'but if I am indiscreet for myself, I would be discreet for you.'

'You lose the temper. That is refreshing. I die of the restraint of temper. What would you do, sir?'

'I would extract a promise from you, to be silent until I have been to France.'

'When do you go?'

'To-morrow.'

'To-morrow! That is soon.'

'Yes. I will do more for you in a week than your *fiancé* has done in years.'

'You are too amiable, but not so amiable as he. I will not promise.'

'You will at least return to the Court with me?'

'No, I cannot, for I go to see Miss Whiston and Mrs. Owler.'

'Those women! You are going to tell them your secrets. I understand you now. Their tongues are steam-engines—once on the rails, they'll never stop.'

'That is why I go.'

'Then I shall accompany you.'

Both paused. Fay had disclosed more than she intended, and Gilbert had gained an advantage; but she retrieved her false step.

'It is the same to me—I go again to-morrow,' she said, stooping to conceal some feeling she did not care to show. 'Ah, here is the first primrose,' she added triumphantly, 'and another, and another! We gather them *en attendant*.'

Stooping to aid her, he saw a flushed, tearful face.

'Dear Fay,' he murmured, 'let us be friends.'

'*Bien!* but I make no promise,' she replied, giving him her hand, and averting her head. 'I am still the mistress of my own destiny.'

He held the hand a moment, then said,—

'Be it so, Fay. Go your ways, and I go mine; but remember, I go to Paris on your account to-morrow.'

'Then let us be friends and gather primroses to-day,' she replied naïvely. 'But I am my own mistress again to-morrow, when I can visit Miss Whiston alone.'

She glanced maliciously at Gilbert, whose face was flushed and angry; nevertheless, when she returned to the house, she dropped her letter to her uncle into the post-bag, muttering, 'It is late, and I will chance it. You may be all-powerful with your family, Mr. Oreburn, but not with Fay.'

CHAPTER XLII.

FROM COURT TO COTTAGE.

'DE GRÂCE, Elinor, displace these Penelope's webs, and these ghosts of all the old gentlemen Oreburns!' said Fay. 'The room is like the castle of the enchanted princess, where all was immovable.'

'I cannot disarrange what Mr. Butterfield placed here. It would be sacrilege,' replied Elinor.

'I also adored him; but I cannot imagine that he covered all these chairs and sofas with antimacassars gaping with holes, and flowered like the counterpanes in the east wing. I pray you, *mon amie*, remove them, for Saar Gilbert's sake. You know how he disfigures those heavenly white muslins that you made so carefully, and that Arbitère herself "got up," as she calls it.'

'I wonder who worked them all?' sighed Elinor.

'All the young ladies that have lived in the village since the reign of George III.; and you remember he was the oldest king of English history, though I forget absolutely his exact date and age.'

'Perhaps we might set them aside; but I am resolved not to touch the pictures,' said Elinor.

'You call these pictures! Look at these black *silhouettes* of Oreburns, that were apparently born years ago—these portraits of Oreburns in uniform; Oreburns in wigs; Oreburns in Parliament, with eyes that would petrify one; these daguerrotypes of Oreburns—Pardon, this is Saar Gilbert's father. *Bien!* you must agree that he is not handsome. Well, here is the present race. *Ma foi!* they are at least an improvement on the last generation; though even Saar Gilbert, who is divine, stares at one like an ogre. And Gilbert—*vois!* he is highly finished into a miniature. Wide blue eyes, red cheeks, curly hair, and a white frock. Yet he is *gentil*. We will not displace him. I wish he were here—for it is *affreusement triste* since his departure. He has been gone a week, and we have not heard.'

'Fay, what a flirt you are!'

'Excuse me. I know not the meaning of the term, but I like amusement; and oh, this house is like a prison after the Court!'

'But think how Mr. Butterfield loved us, Fay!'

'That is past; but this heavy mahogany and these fearful carpets are ever present.'

'Fay, how can you?'

'I feel myself insensible; but I think more of the living than of the dead friend. Permit me to displace the counterpanes for Saar Gilbert's sake.'

Elinor and Fay were trying to arrange Green Oaks Cottage, whither Sir Gilbert persisted in transporting his establishment. It was pre-eminently a bachelor's home, and the furniture was old and ponderous; but everything told of the affection of its late master for the family he had served so faithfully. The pictures on the walls, and the few ornaments, were portraits or relics of the Oreburns, and Elinor's tender heart and conscientious nature refused to disarrange them. Fay began sweeping off the antimacassars, and gradually reconciled Elinor to a few changes. They wandered from room to room, Elinor thinking, Fay talking, until the house looked more habitable. A woman's touch does wonders, and theirs was light.

'I met Mrs. Moneypenny just now,' remarked Fay, while she was arranging crocuses and hepaticas in an old-fashioned vase, and Elinor was placing a carved high-backed chair near a bright fire for her father's use. 'She said Miss Maxwell was *au désespoir*, and Monsieur Villy much depressed, since their mother's death. *Hélas*, my poor *fiancé!* He is to be down again in a day or so, and I am dying to see him. Do you know, Elinor, Madame said she saw no reason why she should not call and bring Lizzie while we were such near neighbours. I gave her to understand that we were about to change the air, while the Court was under repair.'

'Fay, I will not listen to you. I am sure you could not be so untruthful.'

'You use such strong language, *ma mie.* I only romance, or, as the French say, *dis des contes.* But the amiable lady informed me that, Saar Gilbert and Mr. Moneypenny being friends, she saw not why we should not all be friends. I agreed implicitly, though I have remarked the meeting of the gentlemen—hats in the sky, finger-tips touching. However, I entreated her to come, and assured her Saar Gilbert would be delighted, and it would be a *jour de fête* for us. I think she will call. Then we shall shortly be as one family, and Monsieur Villy become quite tame. *Ah, c'est charmant, ça.* I want but a few fern leaves, and they are budding in the orchard.'

Before Elinor could remonstrate, Fay was out of the room by means of a French window, down a garden path, and into an orchard, through which was a way to the river.

'What will she do next?' murmured Elinor, throwing herself into the high-backed chair, and covering her face with her hands.

'Where is the hostess of this mine inn?' broke her momentary abstraction; and Sir Gilbert walked in, a small valise in his hand.

She started up, exclaiming, 'Dear father!'

'What, "tears, idle tears," my daughter? Let them flow. You, at least, need not be ashamed of them.'

Sir Gilbert folded her in his arms, and she wept out those rare tears on his shoulder. Fay returned with a bunch of fern-leaves. First withdrawing, then advancing, she said,—

'We shall be happy yet; I foresee it. Dear Saar Gilbert!—dear Elinor!'

She crept up to them, almost fearfully, and laid her fern-filled hand on Elinor. Sir Gilbert took her also to his heart, with a tender 'Fay, *ma petite!*' which brought a passion of tears to her eyes.

'Oh, if I have been naughty—if I have offended you—forgive me!'

One of those pauses, successors of emotion, followed. Sir Gilbert spoke first.

'Better independent here than dependent there. We all love one another, and he has none to love; let us forgive him.'

'Never!' cried Fay, her eyes flashing through her tears.

There was a gentle rustle in the hall.

'Aimée,' said Elinor, calm in a moment.

Fay hurried out. Aimée had arrived in her donkey-chair, accompanied by Arbiter, and was surveying the scene. She carried Fay's cat in her arms.

'*Mon ange!* you are come, and you bring my Villy,' said Fay, averting her tearful face by smothering it in Villy's fur.

'The house is larger than I thought, and so warm,' said Aimée cheerfully, letting Fay support her to the drawing-room. 'How pretty!—French windows, muslin curtains, and flowers.'

'And thy couch is to be here,' ejaculated Fay, pointing to a vacant space.

But Aimée had seen the tears.

'We have had a little scene, darling,' said her father; 'let it shift with you. Occupy my gouty chair till the couch arrives.'

Aimée bore up best, and in a few moments father and children were smiling at Fate, over a letter just arrived from Paris. It was as follows:—

'MY DEAR FATHER,—Here I am at last, and I have just seen the Aigrets, whose documents seemed so important. The astute Monsieur Villy himself (excuse my impertinence, Fay) could not have been more subtle. I allowed them to believe me a disinterested person,—as, I presume, I am,—seeking intelligence of Monsieur de Saint Ange. I heard with Spartan patience the details of Mr. George Arlington's wanderings. I learnt that he applied regularly—as most of us do—for his dividends, but that Messrs. Aigret knew nothing of how he passed the intermediate quarters, and less than nothing of his daughter. However, the casual mention of Fay brought a ray of light—such as her actual presence does. Many years ago her father had come to the Aigret office in great distress, having suddenly lost her. He had left her, he said, by permission of Madame la Marquise de Marimon at Château Marimon, in Brittany, and she had run away. (She must, by the way, have a Bohemian tendency for wandering.) Of course Messrs. Aigret could not lose their valuable time—which was, as they graphically expressed it, money—in an unpaid search, so they heard no more of the matter, until, during a quarterly application for the needful, it evolved that the child was recovered. It is strange, but she must have been at the château when we were in Brittany, and neighbours of the Marquise. My French bringing-up stood me in good stead, for these fellows believed me a Parisian, and tried to fathom the motives of my inquiries. I studiously avoided the name of Arlington, and let them believe I had never been in England. I find that I ought to have been a lawyer. I am about to start for Château Marimon, where I shall appear as an old acquaintance. I shall like to see the stately Marquise again. But she may be dead—Aigret could not tell me. However, I am off. Those villainous pettifoggers persisted in the statements made in their letters to the General, though they were as careful not to implicate him, by name or otherwise, as I was. They had never seen Madame de Saint Ange, they said, with a sneer, and you may imagine the rest. As you know the Château Marimon, you can easily find out if Fay has any recollection of such a place. Tell her to brush up every corner of her memory, and to write me a letter there, if she discover anything tangible. I sold my nuggets in London for a good round sum—but of this when we meet, which will be in that Tusculanum, Green Oaks Cottage. I scarcely know myself in Paris, but dear, quaint, homelike Brittany will not be so much altered. Love to all, and tell Fay—well, never mind; I will tell her myself.

'Your ever affectionate son,
'GILBERT OREBURN.'

'What more has he to tell me?' cried Fay, with burning cheeks, when Sir Gilbert laid down the letter.

'Rather, what have you to tell him?' asked Sir Gilbert. 'Do you remember this Château Marimon?'

Fay rubbed her forehead, as we all do when we seek to recall the forgotten past. Is the seat of memory there? She remained longer silent than she had ever done before, while she sought to fathom that sea where so many dead relics lie. At last she said,—

'I have a distinct recollection of some strange grand place where my father left me, with promises to return. I remember especially a tall dark lady in a great room, with a poodle in her lap. I see the white fur and blue ribbon now. I screamed as I did when I came to the Court, and the dog barked. I think she sent me from the dark room. It must have been wainscoted, for the scene returns to me in part. I was severely treated, and I ran away. I cannot recall how my father found me. I remember absolutely no more.'

'Go and write it at once to Gilbert,' said Elinor.

'May I see his letter?' asked Fay, her colour deepening.

Sir Gilbert passed it reluctantly, with—

'Write your own thoughts without considering him, so that, if the Marquise be alive, she may remember you. She is a magnificent lady, of the old *régime*, proud as the Bourbons.'

'Perhaps she will give me money to buy back the Court. I do not like Boykin's letter, though he has been good to me. He believes not in my father, or—or—my mother.'

Oh, how the crimson flushed like a deep sunset cloud!

'*Ma petite*, we know not what to believe as yet. We have delayed too long; but our decisive gold-digger seems to have stumbled upon a promising plant, as he calls his ore-bed. You must help him to dig it.'

'I will. But tell me first of the Marquise and the château.'

'You are certainly not unlike her, Fay,' said Elinor, whose eyes were anxiously fixed on the agitated girl.

'All Frenchwomen and poodles are alike,' said Sir Gilbert.

'She always frightened us, she was so cold and *dévote*,' said Aimée. 'Not devout as Mr. Tenderton, but as the severest monk.'

'She was just, if I remember aright,' remarked Sir Gilbert. 'She had one daughter, said to be in a convent, and several sons in the army. They were staunch royalists, and not red republicans like you, Fay. You must change your manners with your politics, if you are ever honoured by an introduction.'

'And the château—what is it like, Saar Gilbert?'

'A rambling, quaint, aristocratic place, embedded in chestnut-trees. I believe they lived on chestnuts, and sold their apples. Indeed, we all did in Brittany. Now write your letter while your memory is fresh, and we will then tell you more of Château Marimon.'

'Come with me, Elinor,' she said appealingly. 'It is so strange here that I shall find no words alone. See, Villy is bewildered! He must also come.'

She took up the cat and letter.

'Thou must not growl, *méchant;* the document concerns me, and arrives from Boykin. We have a diminished apartment, but thou must familiarise thyself. My letter shall be magnificent as the Marquise, Saar Gilbert.'

She left the room, followed by Elinor. They went to a bedroom which they were henceforth to share together, in which were two small pink-curtained beds; thence to a four-foot square dressing-room, once a store closet, which had been arranged for Fay. Here in a corner, on a small table, she had placed her desk and other treasures.

'If Boykin had not insisted on taking my photographs, it would not seem so strange,' she muttered; 'but he is oppressively tyrannical. Now, Elinor, sit down on that pink box, but go not through the cover, for it contains my best bonnet.'

Elinor sat down, and they composed together a letter to Gilbert; that is to say, Fay wrote, and Elinor occasionally suggested.

'I write more easily to Monsieur Villy,' was Fay's conclusion, as she signed herself, in irregular characters, 'Félicité Gabrielle de Saint Ange.'

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

'GREATNESS wears fortune humbly,' remarked Sir Gilbert to Mr. and Mrs. Tenderton, when they made their first call at the cottage. 'Our heiress dispenses her favours as an anchorite, and we are besieged with old women, if there is such an anomaly; for the sex is ever young.'

'Miss Oreburn is a pattern to all young ladies,' said Mrs. Tenderton. 'The school, and the poor, and'—

'Pray do not talk of me. There should be a penalty for personal remarks, and papa would pay it perpetually,' said Elinor, interrupting Mrs. Tenderton's eulogium.

'What an alliterative sentence! Cards! this looks ceremonious. And you look alarmed, *ma fille*,' said Sir Gilbert, as Tom, in 'buttons,' brought in cards, and Elinor passed them to her father, who continued, frowning slightly,—

'To what favourable divinity must we return thanks for this undeserved honour? Ask them in. My Baronet is far more magnificent here than even in our more elevated position,' he added, addressing Mr. Tenderton. 'He is about to demand powder and pink silk stockings.'

'They are all so fond of you, Sir Gilbert, that they cannot do enough for you,' said Mrs. Tenderton, who was more ready with an answer than the Vicar.

'Undeserved again,' returned Sir Gilbert, rising to receive Mrs. Moneypenny and Miss Maxwell, preceded by Fay.

In spite of Sir Gilbert's good breeding, the meeting was awkward, and even Fay and Mrs. Tenderton, who were instrumental in bringing it about, feared they had made a mistake. Aimée, who was in the room, served as a cloak to some confusion; for, when a ceremonious greeting on her father's part was over, she kissed her aunt affectionately.

'I am so glad to see you at last!' she said simply. 'I have desired it long. And Miss Maxwell also; how good of you to come!'

Mrs. Moneypenny gazed on Aimée with a sort of rapt amazement. She could not speak, for she almost thought she saw her dead sister in life again. She and Miss Maxwell were in heavy black, which contrasted with the soft grey and white of Aimée's half mourning. The gentle girl always looked as of the dawn, and now it was the pink and golden early flush amid the lightest of clouds. Although she was still partially confined to her couch, there was little of the invalid in her sweet, blushing face and loosely dressed golden hair. How lovely she was!

So thought Miss Maxwell, whose bright beauty seemed already faded. Indeed, Sir Gilbert scarcely recognised the handsome, piquante Lizzie of some few years back, in the pale, haggard, worn face of the orphaned girl who stood looking fixedly at Aimée. The strange alteration struck the tenderer chords of his nature, and when Fay, who was watching him, crept up to him and whispered, with some hesitation, 'It was my fault, I made them come;' he was half prepared to pardon the unexpected intrusion.

'You are Nellie over again,' said Mrs. Moneypenny at last, breaking a silence disagreeable to all. 'Oh, my dear! I never expected to have felt like this, or I should not have come. You carry me back twenty or thirty years, to the time when we were girls together, loving one another as—as you love your sister.'

The good lady's emotion could not be mistaken.

'Loving one another?' repeated Sir Gilbert doubtfully and interrogatively.

'Yes, Sir Gilbert, we all loved her dearly, and were only too proud of her.'

'Then why did you forsake her?'

Sir Gilbert's voice trembled.

Mrs. Moneypenny turned sharply round and faced him.

'Why did you carry her off, Sir Gilbert?'

'Because we loved one another.'

'That was no reason for breaking our hearts, and forbidding her to see us again, or write to us. We were her kith and kin.'

'I never forbade my dear wife anything, during our brief, happy life together,' said Sir Gilbert, looking Mrs. Moneypenny in the face for the first time in his life. 'She wrote when and to whom she liked, and I was indifferent to the results. Indeed I scarcely inquired into them. She gave me to understand that her family declined a reconciliation, and as I did not marry them, but her, I submitted to their decision with resignation.'

Happily Mrs. Moneypenny did not understand the sarcasm, if some of the others did.

'That was our pride, Sir Gilbert; and people said all sorts of things to irritate us, particularly General Arlington, who, as you know, wanted to marry her himself.'

'Oh, I understand the position. Disappointment does not sit well on his limited understanding—eh, Elinor?'

The faint smile that accompanied the 'Eh, Elinor?' reassured that trembling daughter. But Mrs. Moneypenny could not command her smiles, and did not understand Sir Gilbert.

'You know, Ma'mselle,' addressing Fay, 'that I bear no malice, though I was doubtful how Sir Gilbert would receive me; and if Moneypenny knew I was here, he would be as angry with me for forcing myself where I am not wanted, as he was with Willie for intruding at the Court—*is* indeed, for nothing I can say will make them friends. But I should never have called at the Court. This house seems more natural to me, because poor dear Mr. Butterfield and my husband were like brothers. Then, you see, Sir Gilbert, here we are neighbours, and I thought it would be right to call and see my nieces,—poor Nellie's children,—particularly as your son called on Mr. Moneypenny.'

'My son! He did not mention the interesting fact,' said Sir Gilbert, amused and annoyed. 'But pray let us sit down—it is too fatiguing to converse standing.'

The diversion of finding seats changed the current a little. Lizzie seated herself near Aimée, and Mrs. Moneypenny by Sir Gilbert. A few commonplace remarks followed; but Mrs. Moneypenny was too much in earnest to be diverted from her end. Again turning to Sir Gilbert, she resumed:

'It was pride on both sides that caused all the unhappiness. Nellie's marriage placed her so much above us that we believed you both looked down upon us; and my father declared it was your—I mean her—place to make the first advances.'

'He was right; I believe she did,' said Sir Gilbert.

'But *you* did not,' blurted out Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Are there any advances so poor a pensioner can make now to atone for past misdemeanours? I am not my own master, and refer you to my daughter. My son has already taken the initiative.'

'He is the nicest young man I ever saw, and he quite won my husband's heart.'

'My dear madam, if he were only here to show me how he gained so inestimable a prize—not easily won, I should say.'

'Well, Sir Gilbert, he called and made himself pleasant. If you would only—but I dare not say more.'

'Call and make myself pleasant,' supplied Sir Gilbert. 'I have too great a respect for Mr. Moneypenny's good taste. I am his debtor—it is for him to condescend, not me. He is truly a man of metal, and I have just discernment enough to discriminate between the sterling and the base.'

'He is sterling enough, and there's nothing base about him; but he's as cranky as an old bureau. You need know all the corners and secret springs to find him out at all,' said Mrs. Moneypenny.

'Admirable! There is such a one in this house, which I have been vainly trying to explore.'

'Well, now, Sir Gilbert, if you would only attempt both at the same time, and condescend to come to the Castle. Like that man and the mountain I was reading of in some book the other day.'

'Mahomet, possibly?' suggested Sir Gilbert, now really laughing.

'Ah, that was the name. The Vicar always says you know everything.'

'A thousand thanks for your good opinion, Vicar,' said Sir Gilbert, turning to Mr. Tenderton. 'I hear you look on me as a sort of cyclopedia.'

This diversion made the conversation general; and Fay could ill conceal her pleasure at what she termed the reunion. Mrs. Tenderton whispered to her,—

'Now all the parish will be friends, and the Vicar will be happy.'

Remember the General!' suggested she maliciously.

'We do, I assure you, my dear, in our prayers,' responded straightforward Mrs. Tenderton.

While this was passing, Lizzie Maxwell and Aimée were making efforts at conversation—rather Aimée made the effort, but elicited only monosyllables in return. At last a casual remark aroused Lizzie.

'I hope you will come and see us often, now the ice is broken. My sisters will be glad, I am sure,' said Aimée, who often called Fay sister.

'And you?' asked Lizzie sharply.

'I also shall be glad; but I am sometimes a prisoner to my room, and see no one.'

'I thought Dr. Hope had quite restored you. I hear people talk of you as one of his resurrections.'

'What a wrong word! But he has done me much good.'

'Does he visit you often?'

'I have not seen him since Mr. Butterfield's illness and death.

'My brother told me he was daily at the Court.'

'He was very good to me; but I am better now, and do not need him so often.'

'Did you like him?'

'Yes; and I am very grateful to him.'

During this brief dialogue, Lizzie's eyes, now become preternaturally piercing, were fixed on Aimée, who trembled nervously beneath their inquisitive gaze.

'May I see you alone some day? I have a question to ask you,' continued Lizzie, after a pause.

'Certainly. But I could answer it now.'

'Not with all these people round us. Why are you so beautiful? They have not overrated you.'

The large dark eyes flamed, and Aimée's dropped beneath them. She thought they were sad, stern, and penetrating.

'I am very sorry for you,' she said hesitatingly, and putting out her hand as she again met the sharp glance. But Lizzie did not take it. She only made an impatient gesture and turned away.

Mrs. Moneypenny rose to go, with the customary excuse of having made 'quite a visitation,' and came to wish Aimée good-bye, saying that she did not yet know whether she had done right or wrong, but she supposed she might at last consider herself as their aunt.

'You have done quite right,' said Aimée, kissing her.

When they were all gone, Sir Gilbert threw himself into his chair by the fire, took up his glass, and looked at Fay.

'So we have to thank you for this unmerited honour. What unlimited *crêpe!* What concentrated condescension!'

'Oh, pardon, Saar Gilbert, but I am enchanted. You were so divinely gracious, and dear Mrs. Moneypenny so sweetly amiable,' said Fay.

'Ah, our amiable aunt! If Elinor wills, I obey. But what induced Gilbert to be so *empressé?*'

'He walked home with Mr. Maxwell, and, meeting Mr. Moneypenny, went in,' said Elinor, colouring.

Sir Gilbert walked out, whistling a tune, and left his children doubtful as to his real feelings.

During the course of the day Maxwell appeared at the cottage. He had just returned from town, and came at once on business. He had seen Mr. Oreburn in London, but had not heard from him. He found Elinor and Fay together, and the meeting was embarrassing; for Fay began at once to express her sorrow for his grief at his mother's death, while Elinor was tongue-bound. He thanked Fay by a grateful glance, then looked at Elinor. She longed to say something, but words would not come.

'Cold as ice!' thought Maxwell, turning to the warm, impulsive Fay.

Sir Gilbert soon came in, a letter in his hand.

'I am glad to see you back,' he said kindly, *almost* shaking his hand. 'We can do nothing without you. What do you think of this, our new Elysium?'

'That it really *is* new, Sir Gilbert,' was the reply.

'You see our embellishing goddesses,' said Sir Gilbert, glancing at Elinor and Fay. 'But even here our fate follows us. When are the affairs to be finished?'

'They are well in train, Sir Gilbert; but we must await Mr. Oreburn's return, and the General's pleasure, to cut off the entail, and sell or transfer the Court.'

'He turns up again. Hear him,' said Sir Gilbert, unfolding the letter and reading it, for it was from his son.

'MY DEAR FATHER,—I duly arrived at this place—the village of Marimon—last Thursday, and took up my abode at the old inn you wot of. I heard that the Marquise was indisposed, but I went to the château to have the news confirmed. I gave my name, and the servants remembered us, and said Madame la Marquise would see me without doubt as soon as possible—but at present she kept her bed, and was in an uncertain, if not actually dangerous state. I returned here and wrote to her. I have had no answer as yet. But I have been making inquiries and researches, and have heard some curious facts concerning her family, which I reserve for the present. I shall not leave until I have either seen her, or had some sort of communication from her. Tell Mademoiselle she must be patient, for there is always a hitch in our best intentions. I have been over the old place, and it is charming as ever. Oh, la belle France! I shall be home as soon as I possibly can. Meanwhile, love to all, except to Fay, who would probably decline it.'

'How does he know what I should accept or decline?' interrupted Fay. 'I shall go at once to France and see this lady; for if she dies we shall be in the dark as before. Saar Gilbert—Monsieur Villy, you will take me?—or I depart alone.'

'Impossible, Fay.'

'*Du tout.* I have the courage and the knowledge. I feel that the Marquise is connected with my destiny, and we should lose no time. The heart assures me that it will be right, and while Mr. Oreburn waits, I should also be there. He is resolute, and does for the best; but I, not he, was the child left by my father at the château.'

Fay looked from one to the other with the resolve of a determined woman.

'I think you should go, if the Marquise remembers you—otherwise it would be useless,' said Maxwell. 'You must wait for another letter.'

'I cannot—I will not!' said Fay passionately. 'Waiting kills me.'

'Meanwhile, we must dine. Maxwell, you will stay and discuss this further over our wine and walnuts. Have we any wine or walnuts, Elinor?' asked Sir Gilbert, taking out his watch. 'Fay, you have only ten minutes for dressing. Forget the Marquise and your destiny till we have gathered strength for their further consideration.'

Fay obeyed reluctantly, gesticulating and muttering as she followed Elinor out of the room, 'I will go to France, if I beg my way there.'

CHAPTER XLIV.

A STRANGE DISCLOSURE.

THE following morning Aimée sat alone in the little drawing-room. She had just had a conversation with Fay concerning the propriety of awaiting her brother's return, or, at least, a letter from him, before making a start for France, and Fay had rushed out in search of Sir Gilbert. Aimée was thinking over Fay's history, and in some way connecting Dr. Hope with it, when Miss Maxwell was announced. She was scarcely seated before she said abruptly,—

'I am glad to find you alone, Miss Aimée, for I come to ask you the question I could not put the other day, and which you promised to answer.'

'Certainly, if I can. What is it?' inquired Aimée gently.

Miss Maxwell fixed her eyes on Aimée, paused a moment, and then said deliberately,—

'Are you engaged to Dr. Hope?'

Aimée flushed, and answered quietly by another question:

'Why do you ask?'

'Because my happiness and yours depend on your reply. For pity's sake, tell me truly.'

'We are scarcely well enough known to each other for silly confidences,' said Aimée, glancing at her questioner.

She saw a face so eager and haggard that she was terrified.

'Silly! Good heavens! What may be silly to you is death to me!' cried Lizzie. 'I repeat—are you engaged to Dr. Hope?'

'I am not,' said Aimée, after a long pause.

'Is that true? Say it again!' she almost shrieked.

'Quite true. Why do you ask!'

'Because I heard he loved you. Does he *wish* to be engaged to you? Has he told you that he loves you?'

'Miss Maxwell, such questions are—almost'— began Aimée, and paused.

'I care not what they are—but I must know my fate,' cried Lizzie, falling on her knees at Aimée's side. 'If you have any pity for one who has suffered torments for years, tell me if he loves you.'

Aimée was silent—she could not say no, she dared not say yes. Lizzie fixed her wild eyes eagerly upon her, as if to look into her heart. Aimée's were so truthful that she read her answer in them, and exclaimed, in a strange, hurried voice,—

'He does! I feel it! I know it! It is you who have destroyed my happiness and blighted my life!'

'Hush! Do not use such expressions—they frighten me,' said Aimée. 'Pray rise and speak more quietly.'

'Not until you answer me. I must know the truth from you. Does he love you? Do you love him?'

'I can tell you nothing until you rise and are calm,' Aimée said, turning very pale.

Lizzie rose.

'Kneeling or standing, I repeat my question. If he has told you that he loves you, and asked you to be his wife, I must know it, and brand him deceiver to you and the world.'

'What can you mean? Dr. Hope has been my physician and friend, and—and'— stammered trembling Aimée.

'And lover!' supplied Lizzie. 'Tell the truth, and end this horrible uncertainty.'

'Perhaps so. I scarcely know myself. But, be assured we are friends—only friends. We shall never be more to one another.'

Aimée said this quietly, and apparently without emotion; but Lizzie saw that her face was like marble. Again she fell on her knees, but this time she buried her face in her hands and sobbed. Aimée laid her hand gently on her shoulder; but she started from her touch as from some sharp instrument.

'What can I do or say?' asked Aimée, in despair.

'Have you not said enough? Does he not love you? And am I not betrayed and heart-broken?' sobbed Lizzie, her head sinking lower and lower, until it nearly touched her knees.

'Will you not make me your friend, and let me help you? Indeed—indeed, I pity you,' said innocent Aimée.

'Pity!—from you!' cried Lizzie excitedly, starting to her feet and again facing Aimée.

'Am I not betrayed and heart-broken?' sobbed Lizzie

What did she see to arrest her in that white, spiritual face? Her own wild glances softened, and she stood silent a moment, with clasped hands and streaming eyes.

'Forgive me — and — yes—pity me,' she said at last, sinking on a low seat near Aimée, and covering her face. 'I have no one now—and I never told her—my mother. Oh, this intolerable pain is killing me!'

'And me,' Aimée might have added; but she silently put her arm round Lizzie's neck, uplifted her eyes, and prayed.

They remained a brief space in this attitude, when Lizzie again rose brusquely.

'I will tell you all,' she exclaimed; and, taking a seat at a little distance from Aimée, and averting her face, explained herself hurriedly and excitedly. 'I have been engaged to Septimus Hope for years—before you returned to the Court. He said it must be a secret engagement—Heaven knows why; but I was too young to know the evil of concealment, and believed his assurances. He said that he should offend the General, and I my uncle, if he declared himself; and that he couldn't afford to marry yet. I cannot tell you half he said, nor his assurances of love and vows of constancy. Mistrust him, if he has made them to you.'

'He has not,' said Aimée quietly.

'But he will, for he loves you—you have said it. I knew that he made all girls love him, yet madly believed myself the chief. Vain fool! My brother often warned me, though I did not confide in him; and my mother,—my poor dead mother,—who suspected nothing, praised him. Oh, if you knew the agony of these past years, you would pity me!'

'I do—I do.'

'But you scorn me too—and I scorn myself. I believed him faithless, yet he was never from my mind; and when I saw him I forgot my anger in his feigned love. He was careful not to commit himself by written word, even in our early intercourse, making General Arlington his excuse. Now they say he is his heir, and he has quite forsaken me. He came to see my mother, and was kind as—as—a son; but he hurried away, lest we should be left alone together. I see it all now. Before William brought me here, he spoke to me seriously. "Expect no love from Septimus Hope," he said. "If he has made you believe in him, he is a villain. I know that such unworthy love as he can bestow is given to another, and she fairer and of higher birth than you, my poor Lizzie." I knew that he alluded to you, for he had named you before; and I resolved to come to you, and, by undeceiving you, shatter his hopes for ever. Will you keep my secret as your life? Promise.'

'I cannot promise, but I will not betray your confidence unwisely.'

'Then you love him! Say you do not love him—say you will not marry him.'

'I shall never marry; but I think you overpass discretion, and, indeed, have tried me much.'

Lizzie looked at Aimée, and saw that she trembled all over and was snow-white.

'Are you ill?' she said hastily.

'I am not well. Perhaps you will ring the bell and leave me; we will talk of this another time.'

She put out her hand.

'Are you always so cold?' asked Lizzie, shuddering, as she took it.

'Not always—but'—

A little cry interrupted the remainder of the sentence, and Lizzie, frightened at what she had done, hastily opened the door. She was met in the passage by Fay, who was going to Aimée with the word 'Impracticable' on her lips, and who had ended a vivacious discourse with Sir Gilbert by declaring her intention of starting at once for France. In her hurry to consult Aimée, Fay passed Lizzie by unheeded, who, seeing her enter the drawing-room, hastened from the house.

Lizzie wandered on, she scarcely knew where, muttering,—

'She is only faint, and will recover; but I shall die.'

She was in great agony of mind, caused by the three most poignant passions of the heart—love, jealousy, and revenge. She had been secretly worked upon by a crafty man, and had yielded to his fancied attachment. She resolved to see him before her anger or courage failed, even if she wandered about all night. Mad for the moment, she would set the world at defiance; strong passion made her careless of its opinion, and she went on and on, heedless of the recognition of the passers-by. She was worn out by long watching over a sick mother, and heart-broken because she had let her die without confiding in her; she was in despair because she had been some weeks in the country, and her faithless lover had not even been to see her. This it was that had driven her to seek Aimée, and learn the truth at all costs. The high-spirited, free-spoken girl had become a reckless creature from that one foolish act of unrestrained passion.

At last she found herself in a by-road that led to the Manor, and she resolved to keep in it until she met him she sought. The recollection of Aimée, instead of softening her by its tenderness, only inflamed her jealousy. For a moment she had yielded to her influence when present, but it vanished when absent. Was it not enough that *he* loved her, and had forsaken her for her sake! And was she so much more beautiful? Was he worth the price she was paying for him? Had not others sought her who were better, wealthier, grander?

Alas! what did it matter?—she loved but him. She had sacrificed all for his sake; she had been bright, handsome, beloved—she was forlorn, worn, and detestable.

She did not know how far she had gone, when suddenly, at a turn of the road, she met him she sought. He was confused for a second, but soon regained his composure.

'Lizzie, is it you? How long have you been down?' he asked, holding out his hands.

She strained her mantle over hers, and drew back to a neighbouring gate, against which she leaned for support.

'I am so sorry for you. I only heard the other day. I have been so much engaged and over-worked,' he continued, looking at her mistrustfully.

'Sorry!—engaged!—how, and to whom?'

They stood a short space gazing at each other.

'What do you mean, Lizzie? I could not be *clairvoyant* enough to know you were here. You did not write.'

'Write!' exclaimed the girl passionately—'write to one who has neglected, betrayed, forsaken me!—write to you, who have wound me round and round in your toils only to crush me! How dare you face me and say I did not write?'

'If you will be temperate, Lizzie, I may perhaps understand you.'

'I will be temperate, since you can be temperate. Hear how blandly I can take up your tone, and say, "Dr. Hope, I understand you; you are a poor, deceitful coward!"'

She said this mockingly, her eyes fierce, her mouth set. He maintained his composure with difficulty.

'May I request an explanation of this unfeminine language?'

'Yes, and it shall be masculine I know you now, and repeat you are a deceiver and a coward.'

'What do you know?'

'That you love another, being engaged to me.'

'Is that impossible? Many men love more women than one.'

'You avow it to my face—you brand yourself a liar?'

'Come, Lizzie, I really do not understand you. What do I avow?—what is it you know?'

'I know that you are in love with another, and have told her so.'

'With whom? It is you who are *clairvoyante*.'

'With Aimée Oreburn.'

She fixed her eyes on him, and his quailed. He could never hear that beloved name unmoved. He recovered himself, however, and said,—

'From whom have you heard this astounding piece of gossip?'

She had intended to tell him that she had seen Aimée, but she resolved not to gratify his curiosity.

'I will not betray my informant, but I know it as surely as that you once loved me.'

Her voice quivered slightly, and the touch of womanly tenderness moved even him. He approached her, but she shrank back.

'Dear Lizzie, pray believe there is no truth in this.'

'Do not call me dear—the word is poison from your lips. Did I say you once loved me? You never loved me; you have sworn that your heart was mine, while, if you had one, it was given to her. Truly she has secured a treasure frequently transferred. I had heard of your capabilities before, but, blind idiot that I was, I did not believe in them. Now I believe that you have deceived others besides me.'

'You *can* have no confirmation for your assertion.'

'Hush! you have told lies enough. I have certainty, and I have revenge. Your love is not returned.'

She saw that her thrust went home.

'Anything more?' he said coolly.

Her pride was roused. She had expected anger, protestations, even a gleam of the old love, but not this icy indifference.

'Anything more!—yes, a thousand things more; you made me love you—you will make me hate you.'

'And why? I have committed no offence deserving this tragic punishment. I have been the plaything of fate all my life, and never my own master. Lately the General has claimed me so entirely that I have not even visited the young lady you name, professionally. I cannot account for your imaginations.'

'Then you will openly avow our protracted engagement, and free me from the slavery of secrecy? You are not so inestimable a boon, after all, that one need wear out life for you.'

'Quite true; but, while I am still unsettled, I should ruin my prospects were I to offend the General. You see, Lizzie, I learn wisdom from experience, and a long engagement is a foolish thing. I perceive you have also discovered this. It hampers both sides; and certainly the lady more than the gentleman.'

'Truly I have discovered it to my cost. I have lost my best years, I have worn myself out in unnatural hopes and fears, longings and disappointments, for you, who are heartless and worthless! I have deceived the most tender mother, and the bravest, kindest brother that girl ever had! but he at least shall know. I have been made hard and careless in religion, forbidding in manner, and—may God forgive me—jealous, revengeful, and utterly worldly! And this for you—for you! Go! You are free! I release you from every promise you have ever made me; and I heartily pray that Aimée Oreburn may repay a thousandfold your perfidy to me.'

Her eyes flashed, her thin cheeks flushed, her frame quivered with indignant emotion. Dr. Hope listened, undecided, his usually enigmatical countenance betraying anger, and even pain, as she lashed him to the soul with her words.

'Lizzie, tell me what has roused you thus?' he said, with a strange fear for Aimée.

'That is my secret. All mutual understanding is over between us. I pray never to see you again.'

'You are in earnest in wishing to break off our—our engagement?'

'As much in earnest as you, cold, cruel, selfish, deceitful that you are!'

'Perhaps it is best,' he said.

'Coward! *you* know that it is best for you, and God knows it is best for me. I shall have my revenge!'

She turned from him, and tottered down the road. He watched her a moment with compressed lips, moved as if he would follow her; then muttering, 'It is best,' also turned. He was arrested by the word 'Stop!' Again they faced each other.

'Take them back!' she cried, tearing something from her neck, and a ring from her finger.

She cast the trifles he had given her at him, and they fell between them on the road. She hurried off once more. He looked after her, this time almost wistfully, and the word 'Lizzie' escaped. She either did not, or would not, hear. He stooped to pick up a small pearl ring, and a locket containing his photograph. He was free to declare his love for Aimée now.

CHAPTER XLV.

TWO STRINGS TO HIS BOW.

Dr. Hope passed another sleepless night for love of Aimée. He could not therefore be said to be aroused by a loud peal at the door-bell; but he heard it as he lay awake, ruminating. He jumped out of bed, and threw up his window.

'Who is there?'

'Sir Gilbert Oreburn's groom.'

'What do you want?'

'Dr. Hope, Miss Aimée is dead, or dying.'

Down went the window, and out went the doctor into the dark passage to arouse a servant.

'Order my horse to be saddled instantly; and on no account awake the General.'

His commands were obeyed like magic, and in about ten minutes he was on his way to Ashton-under-Oakwoods. He found Aimée in a semi-trance, white and still as a snow-wreath, her golden hair the sunset lying on it. It was and was not death, for flickering life lingered in the body, while the spirit was away. He held the cold hand, and felt for the quivering pulse ; he sought to bring back circulation—in vain. He had been told of similar attacks before she came to England ; but he had not seen so bad a one ; now his skill was baffled. He inquired what had caused this, and heard that Fay had found her in hysteria, to which the trance had succeeded. Fay was unconscious that Lizzie Maxwell had been with her, so rapidly had she passed her by. Dr. Hope became aware that he could feel. He also learned what could arouse Sir Gilbert's feelings. This tender girl had wound herself round their hearts, and as they watched her white, impassive form, it would be hard to say whether father or lover suffered most. Sir Gilbert was in mortal agony lest he should lose his darling, and Elinor also gave way. They had braved and weathered many storms ; but the prospect of Aimée's death overcame them. They had been watching all night, and Elinor found she could watch no longer, for her strength failed her. But a new strength was given to her. This was Fay, who saw that the tearless, strained eyes, drawn face, and halting voice, betokened that the brave spirit was yielding at last. She drew her from the sick-room.

'If you are ill, Elinor, what will become of us? If only you will go to bed and rest, I will watch by Aimée day and night. For all our sakes, *ma mie!* Unless you rest, you will be ill. You have borne so much for us all. Let me help you, darling. I am pained at the heart that I ever grieved you. I will never be *gênante* again. I will yield you all—all—even Monsieur Villy.'

'How can you?' said Elinor, roused at last.

'How can I, *ma mie?* I would do even more. I renounce France and my anxieties, and yield to the counter-forces ; I forget all but you.'

'I can bear anything but her death,' murmured Elinor, tears coming at last.

'She shall not die. The doctor returns, and knows what to prescribe. Sleep, darling, that you may help her to live.'

Elinor, overpowered by fatigue and the long strain on her mind, yielded, and let Fay undress her, and help her into bed.

'Go and see how she is,' she said.

Fay went to Aimée's door ; but Dr. Hope was still within. She watched until she heard Dr. Hope and Sir Gilbert go down-stairs. She followed them and listened to what they said.

'Arbiter maintains that she has been quite as bad abroad,' insisted Dr. Hope, whose face was as pale as Sir Gilbert's.

'You consider her in danger? Must she die?' asked the agitated father.

'No, no, no!' cried the doctor emphatically.

'You will not leave us?' said Sir Gilbert.

'Only to return. I must go for remedies.'

'Why have you been absent so long? Had you been in attendance, this might not have happened.'

'I thought you would have sent for me if you wanted me. Was there any agitation or excitement?'

'Not that we know of. Had there been, the attack might be accounted for. She had a similar one during our residence in France, when my son left us for America, and, as you know, the bell-ringing at the Court was nearly producing another. Your aid prevented it. Oh, if you had not given her up!'

'Where is Mr. Oreburn? He might be of use to her.'

'He is in France, tracking Mademoiselle's relations.'

Dr. Hope cast a quick glance at Fay.

'We will telegraph for him. Let us not lose a moment,' she said hastily.

'You had better,' said Dr. Hope, awakened to a new danger. 'I will do it as I return to the Manor, if you like.'

Sir Gilbert left the room mechanically to write the telegram. Fay addressed Dr. Hope abruptly.

'Will you authorise me to be Aimée's nurse? I will obey your orders as the commandments. I alone am capable; for Miss Oreburn is ill, and Arbitère cannot wait on both.'

'You love her?' gasped the doctor.

'As my soul! And you?' she asked.

A flush of pain was the answer.

'I may watch, and administer the remedies?'

'Yes. I will speak to Arbiter—I must see her—Aimée—again—alone,' he ejaculated, beside himself.

'Come with me,' said Fay, and they hastened up-stairs. She beckoned Arbiter from Aimée's room.

'Tell her!' she said imperatively.

'Mademoiselle will help you to nurse Miss Aimée,' he stammered.

'Why am I to be superseded?' asked Arbiter sharply,

'Miss Oreburn is ill. I desire only to help,' replied Fay.

'Miss Oreburn ill! Go to Miss Aimée, while I see what is the matter,' said bewildered Arbiter.

Dr. Hope slipped in, and Fay remained without. He was alone with Aimée. He leaned over the entranced girl, and put his hand to her heart, his ear to her lips, ceasing to breathe himself, in his agony of anxiety. Was it sleep? Was it death? He scarcely knew. He seemed about to press his lips on the forehead he had not dared to touch in life, and started back, conscious of profanation. He touched the golden locks that surrounded her white face like a halo, as if to assure himself that they, at least, could move ; he took her hand and pressed it, as if to force back a life so precious to him ; he even called on God to help, on whom he had rarely called before —in vain. She lay impassive as a corpse, but—not so cold !—oh, not so cold ! There was hope in this. How he suffered, that man without a conscience !

He was aroused by some clock striking nine. Once more his ear to her lips, his hand to her heart. In vain. He hurried out of the room, and down-stairs to Sir Gilbert for the telegram. Promising to return, he left the house, and Fay went to Sir Gilbert.

'*Mon chéri*, the good God will help us. He will not remove our dearest from us. Rest, then, for all our sakes, that you may be strong when she awakes. I have prevailed on Elinor to lie down—will you also repose ?'

'Not now, *ma petite*. By and by,' said Sir Gilbert, rousing himself. 'If it were not my fault, and if my hopeless negligence had not caused the pain, I should not be so wretched. But if she die !—O God, if she die !'

'She will not—she will not ! And the fault is mine. If my wicked uncle had not avenged himself on you because I came, this might not be.'

'Hush ! We must not question God's will by our own poor instincts,' said Sir Gilbert, rising, with something of resolution in his sad face.

'You will come with me. I make the tea for the first time in the drawing-room. It is more bright.'

Fay drew Sir Gilbert where the sun was shining ; but while she was trying to console him, and induce him to eat and rest, he again wandered off to Aimée's room.

'Is it because I have been exciting them all concerning this abominable Marimon ?' soliloquised Fay, alone for the moment. 'Would that it, and the Marquise, and France, and all but Gilbert, were submerged. Ingrate ! How could I think of myself when they were in pain ? How let Gilbert depart for my affairs, when my benefactor's were unsettled ? How weary them with entreaties to leave them, when my uncle—*le vaurien*—was persecuting them ? Oh, were I the doctor to encounter him, I would pierce him with words sharper than spears !'

While Fay was relieving her mind by this outpouring, the General was fretting over his breakfast. He had heard of the night-summons, and was already resolving to disinherit his intended heir. His own nerves were more precious to him than the life of Aimée. When Dr. Hope's foaming horse galloped panting up to the door, the General was ready with reproaches.

'I tell you what it is, Septimus, if the Court—or I mean the Cottage—is to take you from this house in the dead of night, frightening one's soul out of one's body, and bringing on one's palpitations, you had better return to your Kennels, for I won't bear it, you know; I say, sir, I won't bear it.'

'Pray be calm, my dear General,' said the embarrassed doctor. 'I could not decline to attend a case of life and death. I have half killed myself and the horse by my eagerness to be back before you were down. I did not think you would be aroused.'

'But I was aroused, you know, and lay awake hours, wondering what was the matter. You promised'—

'Yes, sir, I know. I promised not to go, unless professionally summoned. This has been the case.'

'Then you will not go again. I cannot be left, and shall not hold to my promise if you do not devote yourself to me exclusively. I pay for your undivided care, you know,' said the General irritably.

'Yes—yes,' groaned the doctor.

The General looked at him, and his manner changed.

'Why, Septimus, you are ill. What's the matter? I never saw you look so ghastly before, you know.'

'I am only disturbed at having annoyed you, General,' said the heir-presumptive, trying to recover himself.

'Well, there, never mind. I really think you are fond of me. Have some coffee; take an egg—new-laid, quite digestible—or some trout—caught and brought this morning, you know. What's this?'

A servant entered with a letter, and turned the course of the General's thoughts.

'From the Castle, sir.'

'Ah, I was expecting to hear. An invitation to dinner, you know, Septimus. Confound these envelopes—they're nothing but gum. Ha, it is not an invitation after all! Somebody ill and wanting you. What next? Another young lady! Why, all the girls in the country are dying for you, and I am expected to pay you for attending upon them. Here is Miss Maxwell taken suddenly ill, and her aunt begs me to send you at once.'

The General was wroth.

'I need not go—I will not undertake another case. Write and say you cannot spare me,' said the terrified doctor.

'And offend all the Moneypennys? What do you think they would say to my letting you go to those confounded Oreburns, and refusing you to them?'

'You see I am ill, General—you have just said so.'

'Ah, that might do. I will say so, if you will go to bed, and promise not to visit that sickly, sentimental Aimée Oreburn again.'

Dr. Hope found himself in a strait. Ruin seemed better for the moment than to desert Aimée in her extremity. Lizzie's pride and passion were forgotten in the remembrance of Aimée's pale calm. He must go at all risks.

'I cannot compromise you,' he said, after a pause. 'The Moneypennys will say you are selfish, and I could not let you suffer so false an imputation. I had better have my breakfast, go, and return quickly.'

'Then you will be ill, and what will become of me? Perhaps it is fever, and you may catch it and bring it here, you know.'

'I am infection-proof,' replied the doctor savagely, thinking that it was certainly fever, but of the mind, not the body.

'Then if you really suppose your absence will be reflected on me, perhaps you had better go; but pray make a good breakfast. Eating is the best disinfectant. You see, food fills up the corners where malaria, and that sort of thing, creeps in. Have a spoonful of brandy in your tea, and provide yourself with camphor. I will send for chloride of lime, and that new thing they talk about, against your return, you know.'

The doctor hastily swallowed his breakfast, and, mounting a fresh horse, rode off again.

Possible heirship was no sinecure—neither was love. That ride, and the feelings of the rider, were not enviable.

He found Mrs. Moneypenny very anxious.

'Lizzie came in from her walk yesterday quite out of sorts,' she began. 'She has been ill all the night. I thought, if I wrote to the General, he would spare you; but I haven't told her. She has been so low ever since her poor mother's death, that I am almost afraid to speak to her.'

'You had better prepare her,' said Dr. Hope doubtfully.

Mrs. Moneypenny went to her niece. She found her lying passive on her bed.

'Dr. Hope is here,' she said, with trepidation.

'Dr. Hope!' exclaimed Lizzie, starting up. 'How dared he come!'

'We sent for him, love. Your uncle requested it.'

'I am not ill, aunt; but if I were dying, I would not see him. Tell him so. He will understand.'

'But *I* don't understand. There is something under the rose which you don't choose to tell, and which I ought to know, as standing in your mother's place.'

'Oh, aunt, aunt, do not be so cruel! I was a bad, deceitful daughter. Send him away.'

'My dear child, if there is any misunderstanding between you and him, you had better confide in me.'

'A misunderstanding!—oh, if that were all! But send him away. I cannot breathe while he is in the house.'

'Tell me the truth, and he shall go. It is time to put an end to the gossip about you and him. Secrecy eats like a cancer that one can't see; but what's out is curable'

'I dare not tell—I cannot; I did not even tell mamma.'

'Then the best reparation you can make is to tell me. I am sure she wishes it, if she sees us now—and we do not know that the Lord's redeemed do *not* watch over us.'

'I dare not even think of her, I have wronged her so,' cried Lizzie passionately.

'Perhaps love carried you away, my dear; it does most of us, at some period of our lives. For my part, I was in love fifty times before I married your uncle; and I've lived through it, and am fond enough of him, though he is so provoking.'

'Had you ever a lover who kept you privately engaged to him for years, and then threw you over for another?'

'Oh dear no! How very shocking! Septimus has not done this?'

'He has. Now will you send him away?'

'He has been engaged to you for years, and thrown you over for another?'

'Yes.'

'For whom?'

'I will not tell. Aunt, if you knew the shame, the pain, the degradation, you would send him from the house.'

'I will.'

'Do not say that I am making a fool of myself; say that I am well—calm—thankful.'

Mrs. Moneypenny was gone. There was a rustling of silk, a slamming of doors, and she again faced Dr. Hope. He was pacing the dining-room restlessly, wondering what would come next. She did not leave him long in suspense.

'Is what I have heard true?' she exclaimed, her face red, her figure erect, her laces trembling, her voice loud, her manner indignant.

She paused for an answer.

'What have you heard?' said Dr. Hope, forcing indifference.

'That you are engaged to my niece, and have deceived her? Is that true, sir?'

'Scarcely. It must be an hallucination of her brain.'

'A what? I don't understand long medical words. If you have been playing false and loose with Miss Maxwell, you are a scoundrel. I say it as a woman; you know what her uncle and brother will say. But be sure we neither want you nor the General's money, so don't shake in your shoes for fear of breach of promise.'

'I need not. It has been a mere boy-and-girl fancy; and if she has imagined—hem!—she has nothing to show'—

'Fancy, indeed! If you have been engaged to her, and thrown her over for some other girl, the sooner you leave this house the better. The world is wide enough for you and Lizzie, but this room isn't large enough for you and me; and you may console yourself by knowing that she would die rather than see you again.'

Mrs. Moneypenny rang the bell furiously, and walked grandly from the room. The words, 'Dr. Hope's horse—at once,' were audible from the hall. The horse was already at the door, and in a few minutes the doctor had mounted. If the pace at which he rode off answered to the beating of his heart, it was rapid indeed. He little knew that she whom he almost hated now was watching him from her window; and she little knew that he galloped madly off to obtain one more miserable glance of the senseless form of her innocent rival.

This man had reached, or was about to reach, the summit of the Alp he had been long and carefully climbing. What had he obtained? Aspirants for worldly honours, as for the summit of Mont Blanc, have an uncertain task, with a doubtful ending. When the height is scaled, fruition is not happiness; the prize and prospect are equally obscured by clouds, or there is something to wish for higher still. We desire and obtain; we obtain and still desire. He believed himself secure of riches and position at no distant day, but yet his horizon was obscured by a mist, beyond which lay the unattainable—the one pale star that he could not reach. What were wealth and honour without her who lay, white and senseless, in the small, close room whither his machinations had helped to remove her? She was lost to him for ever; and then—that other!

CHAPTER XLVI.

ENTRANCED.

It is impossible to understand or describe a trance. We hear of people who have lain in one for weeks, months, years even; of some who have been so buried; but who comprehends it? Whether the spirit sleeps, or wanders into other worlds, whether it can be aroused or recalled, is unanswered either by reality or imagination. Neither the entranced nor the gazer can say. If the suspension of the faculties by a temporary swoon be mysterious, what is this? That human life, as we comprehend it, should linger in a body, long unnourished by food, untenanted, apparently, by the divine soul, is a mystery great as any of the sublime mysteries in which sceptics dare to disbelieve; great, almost, as life—greater than death. It passes metaphysics or psychics, and strays into the region of the supernatural.

Thus Aimée lingered for days; whilst her friends were sick with watching—whilst they telegraphed for her brother—whilst her doctor risked all in perpetual going and coming. Fay seemed the bravest and most hopeful of the anxious family, and she resolutely undertook, what a few days previously she would have been deemed incapable of. On the fourth night she prevailed on Arbiter to go to bed, and to let her sit up alone with Aimée, Elinor being too ill to attempt it.

What a night it was for the young passionate girl! To sit and watch and watch hour after hour, and gain no sign of recognition—to know that if life lingered in that still, white breast, it might vanish in a moment, and leave the fair tenement only a touch colder and calmer. She had not realised what it was to be alone with the impassive form, and to be unable to rouse it into life. She hoped and believed that Aimée would recover; she prayed in her eager longing that she might return her benefactor's love by restoring to him a living child. She prayed! Yes, as she had never prayed before. She spent the intermediate minutes, between the constant moistening of the lips with wine, on her knees in prayer. She had seen her father die, and remembered it but too well. She had scarcely known how to pray then, but now she had been taught. She remembered Mr. Tenderton, Sir Gilbert, Elinor, who all believed in the efficacy of prayer; above all, she remembered Aimée, whose life was a prayer. The blessed words, 'Watch and pray,' came into her mind, and she knelt by Aimée's bed, and 'prayed without ceasing.'

So the hours passed, slowly, slowly. Sir Gilbert crept in, and, seeing her on her knees, knelt beside her. They rose together and gazed on the sweet white face, so tender in its repose that it seemed almost unkind to wish the spirit back to rouse the peaceful form into the restless fever of life. They wondered how long such a trance could last, recalling the rare instances of this life-in-death recorded, and scarcely credited.

Sir Gilbert, restless and wretched, crept out again to Elinor, and Fay watched on.

Morning dawned, and a faint streak of golden light fell on Aimée's face. Fay was still on her knees. The streak broadened and touched her black hair, as if to bring out the contrast between the living and the dying. She turned her upraised face on Aimée, and beneath the sunbeam imagined a smile. She rose breathless. Yes, she certainly smiled beneath the light.

But the smile floated off into the transient day-gleam.

On her knees again! Fay watched and prayed—prayed and watched. In her agony of hope and fear she uttered some words aloud. She looked at Aimée. Either her lips moved, or the flickering twilight gave them seeming motion. There was assuredly a movement of the face, and a slight twitching of the fingers. Fay could have screamed, but she knew that sudden fright might be fatal. She was in mortal terror, for the reawakening seemed more fearful than the sleep; but she forced herself to composure. However, this passed off, and she was once more on her knees.

A slight movement of the counterpane made her start with that undefined terror which the dread of the ghostly inspires. Her heart ceased to beat, and she was about to run away and call Arbiter, when Aimée's eyelids half unclosed, revealing a blue light, like a streak of sky parting a white cloud. It was as if the soul were trying all the closed portals of the body, either for entrance or departure.

'Which is it?' shuddered Fay.

The parted clouds reunited, and hid again the faint azure beneath.

Fay could bear it no longer—she put her lips to Aimée's; she breathed her warm life over her; she whispered the familiar name she called her Angel; she entreated her to come back. She spoke in French, the language of their childhood, and as child to child.

'Return, my angel, my friend, my little one—return to your father, to Elinor, to me, to Boykin. Return, our well-beloved!'

Was it a breath or voice that answered this appeal? Was it her brother's name that Fay heard, rising, as from the grave, or was it but the echo of her own word? It was her brother's name, that pet name, Boykin; and oh, he was not here!

Once more the white clouds parted, and revealed the sky. Fay, unable to control herself, threw her arms round the lily maid, and sought to warm her into life by her own rushing fire of vitality. She kissed her again and again, and her hot tears fell over her.

'Thou awakest, my cherished, my darling! Is it not that thou wilt live?'

'What is it?' breathed Aimée, low, very low.

'Oh, God be blessed!' said Fay, restraining for a moment her impulse to fetch Sir Gilbert.

'Where is he?' were the next words.

'Here—we are all here, my angel. But thou livest?'

Aimée sighed heavily, and the eyelids seemed about to re-close. Fay took her in her arms, and appealed to her by every tender epithet, entreating her to live. Her voice must have reached the door at which Sir Gilbert stood irresolute. He entered; he saw Aimée half uplifted in Fay's arms; he tottered towards the bed and fell on his knees, crying out, 'My child! my Aimée!'

Again Aimée sighed heavily, and whispered, 'What is it?' then relapsed into stillness.

'Give her wine, Saar Gilbert. I warm her into life.'

The trembling father obeyed; and, as the fair head lay motionless on Fay's breast, moistened the white lips.

'I feel her heart!' whispered Fay, in terror. 'Give her more—more!'

'Is it the dawn or colour?' breathed Sir Gilbert, pale as his child.

'Draw aside the curtain, that we see,' said Fay.

He again obeyed, and the red light streamed in. Once more the eyelids moved, and they fancied they heard the words, 'Where is he?

'She dreams of Boykin. Why comes he not?'

'Look, Fay!—she flushes!—Aimée!—my darling!'

A faint red flickered into the cheek, and disappeared, and colour touched the lips.

'Lord have mercy upon us!' said Sir Gilbert.

The eyes unclosed, and she murmured, 'Is she gone?'

'She asks for Elinor,' said Fay. 'Fetch her.'

Sir Gilbert went.

'Come back to us, my angel,' whispered Fay, kissing her.

Elinor came, pale and trembling, followed by Arbiter.

'Hush! she lives! she speaks! I yield her not! I warm her into life,' whispered Fay.

They stood around the bed, motionless, hoping, fearing, trembling, praying. Animation was returning, but how slowly and how strangely! More light, and the early song of birds crept in. She relapsed again into unconsciousness. There was a sound of footsteps without.

'It is Dr. Hope—he promised to come,' said Sir Gilbert.

He and Arbiter hurried down-stairs.

'Go, Elinor,' said Fay, as Elinor, half unconscious, stood trembling in her night-dress.

Fay was again alone with Aimée, entreating the truant spirit to return. There was a slight footstep on the stairs; the door was pushed open.

'Hush!' said Fay, glancing up.

'Boykin!' murmured Aimée.

'Thank God, I am in time!' he cried, for he it was.

'She knew you! How? Speak to her!' said Fay.

'Aimée! sister!' he breathed, bending over her.

'She hears you in her heart, she feels you in her spirit. Take her in your arms, for she asks for you. I yield her up to you. See, her eyes unclose.'

He helped to support her; she sighed, moved, opened her eyes, and glanced consciously from one to the other.

'Boykin! Fay! What is it?' she asked, and the marble statue flushed—the stream of life flowed back.

'The soul is come!—the soul is come!' exclaimed Fay, as Sir Gilbert and Elinor reappeared.

If the trance is mysterious, what of the awakening? It is like a second birth. They laid her back on the bed, and helped to produce life. It came gradually and slowly, as the dawn of a new day. There was the fluttering pulse, the flickering colour, the inquiring glance, the halting speech—as in Nature there is the hushed sound, the doubtful light, the half-veiled sun, the trembling movement. Breathing life succeeded living death, as heaving morn follows dead night.

'She smiles—it is well,' said Fay, with clasped hands.

Another cautious footstep and scarcely audible knocking without. In a moment Dr. Hope crept into the room, softly as a cloud. Aimée gave a little cry and closed her troubled eyes. He withdrew behind the curtain, and watched her in breathless agony. His heart stops. Are these words for him?

'What is it? Where is he?'

A pause, a questioning glance, and the dear name 'Brother!' shattered the sudden hope. Gilbert bent over her, and she kissed him. The soul was come.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TRANSFER OR PURCHASE?

MAXWELL had made an appointment for Mr. Oreburn with General Arlington and his lawyers. They were to meet at the Court on his return from France, Sir Gilbert having declined the interview. They met accordingly, soon after he came back. Dr. Hope was also present, although he and the General were not quite on their usual terms. Negotiations concerning the sale or transfer of the Court were to be completed, and the General expressed a wish to go over it. Stokes had been left in charge, and was summoned to show the house. Elements in severer conflict could scarcely have been brought together.

'If you do not care to take it on a fair estimate, we shall advertise it, and get more money for it,' said Gilbert proudly. 'Any way, your mortgages are safe.'

'I am aware of that,' replied the General testily. 'I hope your sister is better, for I cannot spare Dr. Hope any longer, you know.'

'She has anticipated you; she positively declines further medical aid,' said Gilbert.

Dr. Hope started, and was about to speak, but checked himself. Maxwell glanced at him savagely, and the General said, looking at him triumphantly,--

'There! she doesn't want you, after all.'

Stokes came, her mouth pursed up with the tightest of strings, and was requested to show the house.

'It's as neat as one pair of hands can make it, gentlemen,' she said, leading the way to the first floor of the east wing. 'You see, I'm alone here just now, and misses the family, as have chosen to change the hair.'

'The furniture is antique,' remarked the General.

'Very; we had better have a sale, and get the Jews to buy it up,' returned Gilbert dryly.

'A sale! Lord bless you, sir, the old gen'leman wouldn't hallow it; he'd rampage the house down,' said Stokes, with uplifted hands.

As if in confirmation, the house-bells began to ring. They had been tolerably silent since the east wing was opened.

'There's for you!—him haven't been ringing for years, and now he's roused up again!' continued Stokes.

'I have heard nothing so cheerful since my return. Is this the ghost of my venerable ancestor?' asked Gilbert.

'*To* be sure, sir. Him 'ave his likings and dislikings, just as my poor Social 'ad—him as was your coachman, sir,' whistled Stokes, turning from Gilbert to the General.

'I know—I know. What is this tomfoolery again?' said General Arlington to Dr. Hope.

'Only a trick, General,' replied the doctor, as the bells ceased when they left the east wing.

'A large place the Court, gen'lemen, as wants a great family to fill it, and I 'opes as you'll live to bring up many children, Mr. Horeburn, and be a blessing to the country, as your hoffspring was before you,' said Stokes, glancing round.

'Not an unpleasant idea, Mrs. Malaprop,' said Gilbert. 'Now if you will "precede, I will go before."'

'Certainly, sir, but Stokes is my name,' uttered Nancy, leading the way up-stairs, and beginning again with the east wing.

As they walked down the corridor, the incorrigible bells recommenced. No one was visible. Of course they agreed that there must be trickery, but Stokes's face and manner belied suspicion. Gilbert examined bell-ropes and wires as they walked on.

'The old gentleman must assuredly be in it,' he said.

'No doubt of it, sir. This is his sweet, as they calls it, though I must say as I never see nothing sweet about it, but I allus hurry through it ; and when I'm hurried, I'm flurried. Your great-grandfather's happartment, sir, as Ma'mselle calls it,' said Stokes, throwing open a door.

'It is a gloomy abode for so festive a spirit,' said Gilbert, entering the ghost-chamber.

The General remained in the passage. He remembered the old Sir Gilbert, and knew that money difficulties connected with the Arlingtons had partly caused his suicide.

'Won't you walk in, sir? No—you don't like it no better than me, said Stokes, lingering near him. 'I used to say to my poor Social —him as you turned off for drinking, sir, and who never 'eld up his 'ead, but died of a broken 'eart because of it—I used to say'—

'Silence, woman!' cried the aggravated General, turning suddenly, and walking down the corridor to the landing. Here he paused, and looked about him, while the bells kept up a merry tinkle.

'Let them sell the old ramshackle, ghost-ridden place,' he said, or, more properly, thought. 'The money is what I want. Why should I worry myself? I'm not going to be rung out of my senses. One doesn't know which way to turn with one annoyance and another.'

The other gentlemen appeared, and checked this silent speech. The lawyers surrounded him ; but Gilbert and Dr. Hope followed Stokes to the door of Aimée's sitting-room, and went in. All was as Aimée had left it. The couch alone was transplanted. A table covered with shreds of drawing-paper, and other odds and ends, stood by her accustomed chair, and a glass containing a bunch of withered flowers was in the centre.

'Poor Aimée!' exclaimed Gilbert, walking to the window.

Angel!' muttered Dr. Hope, secretly extracting a colourless rosebud from the dry glass.

'What are we to do?' asked Gilbert, turning towards him. 'My sister said this morning that she wished to be alone with us, and to see no friends—not even you.'

'Was she wandering?' inquired Dr. Hope.

'We thought not. She was lying quietly, with her hand in Mademoiselle's.'

'Do you think that young lady influenced her?'

'I should imagine her influence would incline to keep you in attendance. But is it right to yield to my sister?'

'Perhaps so, until her mind is stronger. If she asks for me, send for me. If not'—Dr. Hope paused, and thought of the General. Love and interest fought for a moment, and it was a drawn battle—

'If not, perhaps you will be so good as to keep me informed of her state, and I will prescribe by letter. Time and watching will restore Miss Aimée.'

They were interrupted by Stokes, who ushered in the other gentlemen.

'Miss Aimée's boodwer, as Harbiter calls it. It isn't as neat as it might be; for I hadn't the heart to clear her pretty table, poor dear!'

A discussion, begun on the landing, touching transfer, purchase, and sale, was continued, and Gilbert listened impatiently.

'Surely five words should suffice,' he said. 'Let General Arlington take the property on our terms, or let it go to the hammer.'

The dispute was arrested by loud cries in the hall, and on the staircase, of—

'Villy, Villy, *mon chat! Mignon! Méchant matou!* Pooss! Pooss! *Où es-tu, vagabond? Coquin, où es-tu?*'

Gilbert saw Fay pass the door.

'*Te voilà, méchant!* Aimée asks for thee, infidel. I come to fetch thee for our Angel,' reached his ears.

He went into the passage, closing the door behind him. Fay was in her apartment, and he saw her covering the truant Tom with kisses.

'How can she kiss that great ugly brute?' he said jealously. 'If women were more chary of their kisses, one should care more for them; but they kiss everything.'

She paused before the little table, once her shrine. How graceful she was, that girl for whom he had visited France, and would visit it again, yet who cared not for him.

'Ah, Villy, *mon chat*, how happy we were here together!' she sighed. 'I wonder not thou didst evade. How changed it is! The photographs, the cap of Boykin, good Mr. Tenderton's book of devotions, Angel Aimée's illustrated text, Saar Gilbert's Bible, Elinor's prayer-book, my wreaths and curiosities—all transported! Must *that man* possess our *appartement*, *mignon?*'

Mignon uttered a vigorous negative in a resonant mew.

'He must, Fay. The Destinies are completing their arrangements,' interrupted Gilbert, joining her and Villy. 'Your uncle and *fiancé* are together in Aimée's room. What do you think of the combination? They will be here directly.'

'He comes not here, Gilbert. I go with you to France; I prove my parentage; I return an Arlington; I reconcile myself with *that man*, even though I detest him; I stay proceedings; I restore the Court to Saar Gilbert. You have not signed the deeds?'

'No. But it will be done in a few days. Your romance is perfect, but you must prepare for the reality. Even if Madame the Marquise can help us, Monsieur the General is still mortgagee, and master of Oaklands.'

'Gilbert, you have no imagination!'

'Has your *fiancé?*'

'*Ma foi, non.* He thinks only of law.'

'Then why do you think of him?'

'I think not of him extravagantly; but, you see, we have been so long affianced!'

Fay glanced maliciously at Gilbert.

'Absurd! You cannot entertain this childish folly without thinking extravagantly.'

'I think as I like—and I think you have the will of—of Napoléon the Great. But I, too, have a will, and I shall not put it underneath your thumb. If we go together to France in search of my ancient family—ha, ha! I shall have it all my own way. But I go not while Aimée is so ill.'

Fay's manner changed.

'Here is the fate that holds us all underneath his thumb,' said Gilbert hastily, as Stokes threw open a door and cried magnificently,—

'Ma'mselle's happartment!'

It has been said that Aimée and Fay's rooms communicated with a short wall-passage with a baize door at either end. It was here that Stokes appeared.

'Pardon, Mrs. Stokes, but you enter not here,' cried Fay. 'Pardon, General Arlington, and you, Monsieur Villy, and you, Dr. Hope, and you, gentlemen; but this is my apartment.'

Stokes retreated, and Fay planted herself midway in the arched passage. She and her big cat looked like a picture set in an oval frame. Her broad hat was, as usual, awry, and had a bunch of hawthorn in its cherry-coloured band. A many-hued Roman scarf was tied loosely round her throat, and contrasted with a dress of pale grey and her magnificent black hair. The patches of red ever gave the artistic touch to her picturesque figure.

'Silence, Villy! hush, pooss!' she said imperatively, as the cat growled and made a back, at sight of Maxwell's dog Winsome in the distance. 'Excuse my cat, gentlemen, he suffers no dogs.'

She remained a moment silent; the invaders in front, Gilbert in the rear. General Arlington happened to be in advance, and faced her.

'Saar Gilbert has permitted me to dedicate this room to my father, and no enemy's foot shall tread it,' she began, her voice quivering slightly, until an almost imperceptible touch on her shoulder reminded her of Gilbert's protection, and she continued, reassured, the artistic crimson coming to her cheeks. 'You should pause, gentlemen, before you take possession of the property of another.'

She fixed her indignant eyes on the General, who retreated a foot's pace.

'I have not had the pleasure to see you since I was at your house. I thank you for your hospitable reception. I left my muff, and I assure you my hands were frost-bitten. What weather it was! I should have perished in the snow, had not Mr. Oreburn generously picked me up, and provided me with a seat in his carriage. They are good to me, Saar Gilbert and his family.'

Her voice quivered again; but Gilbert's slight touch steadied it. The General's eyes fell, and he glanced uneasily round, as if about to make his escape; but the other spectators hedged him in. She continued, waving her hand,—

'One moment, if you please. We must take the occasion by the hair, or it escapes, and I may not have another. Mr. Oreburn has magnanimously visited France on my account, and has had the honour of an interview with the gentlemen Aigrets, of your acquaintance, I think, General Arlington?'

The General looked at her sharply enough now.

'This amiable firm of advocates—Monsieur Villy declares all of the law angelic—have directed Mr. Oreburn to *noblesse* of my acquaintance, who are about to discover something to my advantage, as the journals say. My birth and fortune have hitherto been obscure, but Madame la Marquise de Marimon has intimated that she can enlighten me on these subjects. You understand, General Arlington? I wish to be clear and concise as is the history of the creation, because I may have power to purchase this place, if it is put under the hammer, as proposed. It must be a gigantic instrument, that hammer! Silence, pooss!'

'What do you mean?' said General Arlington fiercely, while Gilbert pressed the shoulder entreatingly and whispered, '*Ils n'ont pas le sou*,' and Maxwell shook his head cautiously.

'I understand,' said Fay, glancing first over her shoulder, then at Maxwell. 'I mean that the Marquise, who is of the *noblesse* that *obliges* to truth, honesty, and bravery—recognises the photographs of my father and mother, and desires to see me, their daughter. Mr. Oreburn possesses her letter to this effect, and I receive one this morning, entreating my presence at her château. She is acquainted with the family of Saar Gilbert, and would have seen Mr. Oreburn, had he not been suddenly recalled by the illness of his sister. He and Mr. Maxwell are even now in rivalry, as to which shall conduct me to this noble lady, so much do rank and wealth influence us. Is it not, General?'

The inflection of Fay's voice was irresistible, and while the General frowned and tried to speak, Gilbert and Maxwell glanced at one another and smiled.

'Still one moment, and I have done,' resumed Fay, and went on with increasing energy and rapidity. 'I desire neither lands nor name on my own account, for I like freedom better than riches, which bring only discord and feud; but I would be a queen and a Crœsus if I could help my benefactors. I would beg millions of shillings, as the clergymen to build churches, could I buy the Court. I would defy the world and go myself into Chancery—which is long and tedious as the dates in French history—could I secure those *maudits mortgages;* and I would rouse up all the ghosts of all the Oreburns could I clear out from this place the enemies of Saar Gilbert. Still a moment. Patience, gentlemen. *De grâce*, Monsieur Villy, hold in your dog Winsome. *Sois tranquille*, *mignon*, *notre Ange te veut.* That is what I would do if I could; this is what I will do, for I can. I will go to Château Marimon, and thence to all the churches, chapels, cathedrals, and registers of France, until I prove myself, what even you must believe me, the daughter of my father and mother; and also what you refuse to believe me, your lawful niece, General Arlington. Adieu, messieurs.'

She swept a curtsey and closed the door. The baffled General and the lawyers were left without—she and Gilbert within.

'Fay!' said Gilbert, taking her hand impulsively, as they stood a moment together in the dark little arch.

'Gilbert!' cried Fay, withdrawing it, and returning to her room.

'Dear Fay, you are brave and noble, but you should not have assumed so much,' said Gilbert, gazing at her flushed, animated face.

'Thank you for this first kind compliment. I wish I had assumed more; but, now that we are alone for the first time,' said Fay, with unusual solemnity, 'I desire to know what you discovered concerning some members of my family, that you delayed to tell till you returned. These papers of Aigret's have prepared me for anything.'

Her eyes drooped as if in sudden shame. Gilbert hesitated.

'You need not fear; be assured I am a lady,' she said.

He stood close beside her, and once more laid his hand gently on her shoulder.

'How kind you are!' she exclaimed, looking up into his face like a child.

'Then will you not trust me? I would rather not tell you these discoveries, which are at best uncertain, till we get to France.'

'We?' said Fay interrogatively.

'Yes. I shall take you.'

The conversation was interrupted by Maxwell, who came in search of Gilbert, to summon him to a conference below stairs.

'I can make nothing of General Arlington,' he began gravely. 'One minute he will, the next he won't. When you so graciously closed the door in our faces, Mademoiselle, he stood irresolute, as if he meant to force it open; but he changed his mind, and asked ferociously what you meant. As I did not know myself, I could not tell him; but your manner and intelligence were not without effect. Doubtless you have foundation for your assertions.'

'Assuredly, Monsieur Villy. Mr. Oreburn will verify them,' said Fay.

'Everything tends to embitter him, and he gets harder and harder. Even these ridiculous bells, which Stokes sets going for her own purposes, annoy him. May I ask what more you discovered abroad, Mr. Oreburn?'

'Next to nothing. When the telegram came, as I could not start for a few hours, I went to the château. The Marquise de Marimon was still too ill to see me; so I sent her up a letter I had previously written, together with Mademoiselle's photographs. They were returned to me in about ten minutes, with a message to the effect that the Marquise recognised them, and would see me, at all risks, on the morrow. The servant said she was in great agitation, and they feared a relapse. I left word that I was summoned to England, and wrote our address, which the man promised to give her. He said, however, that he was afraid she would not recover. This morning a telegram has come, requesting Fay's presence at Château Marimon.'

'So, you see, Monsieur Villy, I was authorised in my speech to the amiable General,' said Fay.

'I was forgetting him,' rejoined Maxwell. 'Mr. Oreburn, we are keeping them waiting.'

Gilbert prepared to accompany Maxwell. As they were leaving the room, he turned to Fay, and asked her to keep guard in the east wing until the General and his clique departed.

'You have had the courage to face him, and he is a worse foe than my great-grandfather's ghost,' he added. 'I will return, and find out the origin of these diversions.'

As he and Maxwell walked down the corridor, Fay looked after them.

'He is handsomer than my *fiancé*,' she said, and went down the opposite corridor, where she planted herself at the great window, taking care to close it.

She remained a long time stationary, until she was attracted by the sound of wheels. Glancing out of the window, she saw the General's carriage drive round. The bells began again.

'They are gone, and our fate is sealed. I wish Gilbert would come, for, after all, the tintinnabulation, as Saar Gilbert calls it, is not agreeable,' murmured Fay.

But the ringing suddenly ceased, and a door opened cautiously.

'Here it is! Courage, Villy!' cried Fay, starting.

A head was protruded and withdrawn.

'Ha, ha! there is the old gentleman!' she exclaimed, running towards the door and pushing into the room. 'It is you, after all. *Ma foi*, this is a comedy! Oh, Jim, Jim!'

There indeed stood the valorous Jim, shaking in his shoes. Fay burst out laughing, while he tried to run away—which he would have effected, had not Fay's laugh brought Gilbert and Maxwell.

'Please to let me pass, Ma'mselle,' cried Jim, forcing his way into the passage, where he was confronted by Gilbert.

'You are the Court bell-ringer, then?' said Gilbert, seizing him by the collar.

But Jim was loud in protestations, and declared he had only come to see what the old gen'leman was ringing for.

'Explain this trick at once, or I will have out a warrant against you.'

'You had better make a clean breast of it, Jim,' said Maxwell.

'I don't know nothing about it; you must ask sister-law,' returned Jim doggedly.

'Ha! it is the inimitable Stokes,' cried Fay.

'You will come with us in search of her,' said Gilbert to Jim, authoritatively.

They went to look for Stokes, but she was nowhere to be found. Gilbert waxed wrathful, and Jim at last suggested that she might have gone to the cottage. As he seemed to be sure of this fact, they went thither, Fay exclaiming,—

'The *Divina Commedia!* We wind it up with Saar Gilbert.'

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE COURT BELL-RINGERS.

SIR GILBERT and Elinor were together alone, and trying, for the first time since Aimée's illness, to discuss matters calmly. They both looked worn; but Sir Gilbert's buoyant spirit rose with hope of his child's recovery, while Elinor's continued depressed by bodily weakness and mental anxiety. They were talking of Dr. Hope, and wondering what they should do without him, if Aimée persisted in her resolution not to see him, when Stokes knocked at the door, and asked if she might be permitted an audience. It was granted, and she bustled in, much excited.

'It's all hover at the Court, sir,' she began. 'Hi've just heard General Harlington say to Dr. Hope that all the property's 'is, and he'll do what he likes with it.'

'Then we may be comfortable on that score. What else, Stokes?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'I've come to say that I'm at your service, sir, and wash my 'ands of all the fermiliar scenes for ever,' said Nancy, gently smoothing her palms.

'As Tom Hood aptly said, "Washing your hands in invisible soap,"' suggested Sir Gilbert. 'Do you mean to perform that remarkable operation on us as well as the Court?'

'Not unless you desires it, sir. If you and the young ladies can demean yourselves to Green Hoaks Cottage, Nancy Stokes can.'

'Magnanimous female Francatelli!' said Sir Gilbert.

'What, sir?' asked Stokes.

'I am merely addressing you as the prince of cooks. You shall be our Soyer, if you prefer it; he was more economical—eh, Elinor?'

Sir Gilbert put his glass in his eye, and the old smile returned. Elinor saw it, and was glad.

'You had better come here at once, Stokes,' she said.

'Pray do. Your gastronomic substitute fails in her omelettes. Commend me to yours,' said Sir Gilbert.

'And I gave her strict horders about the honions and everythink,' cried Stokes proudly.

Here Fay burst into the room, letting the much-enduring Villy escape. Gilbert and Maxwell followed more quietly.

'A monsoon in the desert of our exile!' exclaimed Sir Gilbert, catching up the devoted Villy.

'Ah, here you are, Stokes!' cried Fay. 'We sought you at the Court, and find you receiving orders for dinner as of old.'

'No, miss; we was a-talking of homelettes,' said Stokes, her arms folded and her head erect.

'Oh, Saar Gilbert! oh, Elinor! The ghost has appeared in person,' cried Fay. 'I exorcised him; Gilbert the cruel held him by the throat and shook him, while Monsieur Villy made for him an extempore brief. It was a delicious comedy in three acts. Act the first—Ghost rings the bells and frightens villain. Curtain falls. Act the second—Villy, *mon chat*, and I watch for ghost; hero comes and confronts him. Curtain falls. Act the third—*Dénouement* anxiously expected. Awaits the heroine, *la belle* Stokes.'

'Who waits for me, Ma'mselle?' asked Stokes.

'The ghost. He says you are his partner. Gilbert, Monsieur Villy, the heroine is here!'

The young men entered, Gilbert looking hot and angry, Maxwell much amused. Fay planted herself behind Sir Gilbert's chair and faced them.

'Stokes!' exclaimed Gilbert.

'Yes, sir?' said Nancy, wheeling round like a figure on castors.

'I hear you are at the bottom of the tomfoolery that has been carried on at the Court. Explain it.'

'I know of no Tom except Ma'mselle's Villy Mongshar, sir, and Sir Gilbert is a-nussing him, as you may see him.'

'Is it not delicious!' whispered Fay to Sir Gilbert, whose glass was now directed to his son, and who restrained a laugh with difficulty.

'Your brother-in-law, the coachman, or whatever his profession may be'—resumed Gilbert hotly.

'Gardener at present, sir, since the 'orses 'ave been farmed out, and he've quite as much as he can do,' supplied Stokes.

'Your brother-in-law, the gardener, then, is, I find, the man who has rung the bells at the Court, and caused the absurd scandal about the ghost for a quarter of a century. He says you are the instigator.'

'Brother-law don't never call names, sir. He've learnt his catechise,' said Stokes solemnly.

Fay laughed, and the rest joined irresistibly.

'It is no laughing matter,' resumed Gilbert, fixing his flashing eyes on Fay, who stood like a comedy-queen.

'Go on, go on!' she cried, waving her hands towards him.

He went on, facing the immovable Stokes.

'By instigator, I mean one who makes another do a wicked act. You are that person, cook!'

'Cook, indeed!' exclaimed Nancy, roused at last, as one is when thus professionally addressed before company.

'Be calm, most excellent Stokes,' interrupted Sir Gilbert, stroking Villy. 'Pray explain the mystery that is too astounding for Mr. Oreburn's patience.'

'What mystery, sir?'

'The mystery of those very provoking bells. A woman of your superior talent would be likely to know. You *do* know, I think.'

'I knows most things as concerns the Court, sir, for all Mr. Horeburn makes so small of me. I 'ave my feelin's.'

Nancy put her apron to her eye.

'Don't weep, Stokes, you imperil the comedy,' said Fay.

'It would be a relief to have it cleared up,' interposed Elinor quietly. 'I am sure you meant no harm, and now that we have left the Court, it would be as well to confess if you really know the secret.'

'Besides, it would be unkind to leave my grandfather in the General's keeping,' said Sir Gilbert.

'He shall never have the Court!' cried Fay.

'He never will,' put in Nancy solemnly. 'He's too frightened of the old gen'leman.'

'Are we to have the truth, or are we to take out a warrant against you and your accomplice?' asked Mr. Oreburn decidedly. 'We have caught him ringing the bells, and he declares that you made him do it.'

'Well, *to* be sure!' whistled Stokes, uplifting her hands. 'I've no need to be afraid to tell what was for the good of the family. If my poor Social and I set the bells a-going, 'twas to frighten that old cormagant away from the place; for Social knew as he was terrible afraid of ghostes and being alone in the dark. He halways 'ad lamps to his carriage, and a wheel couldn't rub again a stone but he calls my poor Social a drunken brute, and we 'as our feelin's, as I said to you, sir.'

'I suppose Mr. Social Stokes did us the honour of residing at the Court?' said Gilbert.

'What was we to do, sir? The General wouldn't give him a character, and he was in bad 'ealth. I was taking care of the place, and I couldn't refuse my own 'usband and child a refuge. So I just let 'em into the heast wing, when Mr. Butterfield came, and we took to ringing the bells, because everybody said the Court was 'aunted, and we thought it might keep General Harlington's 'ands hoff the property, knowing as my poor Social did, who 'ated 'im'—

'One moment, Stokes,' interrupted Sir Gilbert, shivering.—'Maxwell, will you suggest to some member of Parliament to bring in a bill for the total abolition of H's. The petition of that excruciated letter to our three counties has been of no avail, and it is worse than useless in the alphabet.'

'Did Mr. Social Stokes also do us the honour of *dying* at the Court?' asked irascible Gilbert.

'No, sir. He was took for death at the Horeburn Harms.'

Even Gilbert smiled at this combination.

'Then why, most diplomatic Stokes, did you continue to ring after that most unfortunate stroke of fate?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'Hapopletic stroke, please, sir—but not from drinking, as the old General said. We kep' up the bells because people said the hold cormagant would swallow hup the family; and says I to brother-law, "the hold gen'leman won't be swallered;" so I told him how to ring the bells when I was previous hoccupied; and he *did* ring whensoever the General showed his nose. Mr. Butterfield tried to stop 'em, but, though he was as keen as a cleaver, he couldn't find hout 'ow we tied the cranks together, so as they rang tumultuous like.'

'You probably did not realise that your tumult brought on a recurrence of Miss Aimée's fits,' said Gilbert indignantly.

'Sir, I don't understand your dixonary words; but all I did was for the family, as is hancient and honourable; and we have took care not to frighten Miss Haimée since. To-day she was from 'ome, so we give the hold henemy a furwell blessing ; and if he've got a 'air on his bald 'ead, my name hain't Stokes.'

'You are quite a beldame—or, as Mademoiselle would say, *belle dame*, and Mr. Oreburn would translate, fine lady—eh, Gilbert?' said Sir Gilbert, glancing from his son back at Fay.

'I think the sooner she is translated from this to some other see the better,' said Mr. Oreburn magnificently.

'In spite of the sacrificed Social—the indefatigable Jim, my Baronet, and—my omelettes! What does Elinor say?' sighed Sir Gilbert.

'If Stokes would return to the Court for the present, as it seems to be open to the public, it might be for the general good,' replied Elinor. 'You may go, and come to me to-morrow.'

When Elinor's head rose high there was no appeal ; still Stokes was about to rebel, when Fay stole behind her and whispered,—

'Go, you dear old Stokes. I will follow you, and we will finish up the Cormigant between us.'

'I can take my warning whensoever you please, ma'am ; but if it was my last breath, I should say I done it for the family.'

Stokes curtseyed to Elinor first, then, after a succession of attempts at bending her very stiff knees, disappeared.

A general discussion ensued concerning the bells, and the part they had played in the domestic drama. Sir Gilbert was for temporising, as usual, his son for sending off Stokes and Jim, and Elinor for acquainting General Arlington with the truth at once. She caught Maxwell's eyes fixed upon her.

'Do you agree with Miss Oreburn?' asked Fay, who had seen the glance.

'Pray help us, Maxwell. You are our only secure adviser,' said Sir Gilbert wearily.

Maxwell had been surveying the scene from the door, against the post of which he was leaning. He came forward, and replied cautiously,—

'If Miss Oreburn would make a point of the cranks being unfastened, and let the housekeeper remain until the transfer is completed, the thing would die a natural death. The General is so irritable that a straw may turn him ; and Customs told me that it was impossible to keep him five minutes together on any one point. The lawyers know well enough that it is best for him to take the Court in lieu of the mortgages ; but I heard him tell Hope that he would have nothing to do with a ghost-ridden ruin, but would have hard cash.'

'Then let us sell and give it him,' interrupted Mr. Oreburn.

The delay, and the extra expense, would be enormous. If he were the only interested person, one might manage him; but there is a counter-force.'

'Ah, you mean the doctor,' said Sir Gilbert. 'May I ask why you, generally as cautious as Charon, called that Æsculapius a sycophant?'

'It is patent to every one. He is the General's heir,—*pro tem.*, at least,—and a contemptible'—

Maxwell paused. He always warmed into a passion at the mention of Dr. Hope, and he was forgetting himself.

'*Vaurien*,' supplied Fay. 'I take my Villy to Aimée, Saar Gilbert, who has been awaiting him since ten this morning.'

She took her cat, and left the room. Maxwell made further inquiries concerning Gilbert's adventures in France, and said that Fay should go there at once.

'You would like to take her, doubtless?' said Sir Gilbert.

'I? That would be impossible at present. I am needed here.'

'I shall go with her,' said Gilbert decidedly. 'She is under your protection, father, and if you decline to accompany her, I will.'

'She says she will not have you as her *preux chevalier*, but prefers her *fiancé*,' returned Sir Gilbert quietly.

The young men looked at each other. Gilbert's haughty, jealous anger showed itself in his eyes; but Maxwell once more glanced at Elinor, whose head was bent down.

'My French is imperfect, and I have not the pleasure of knowing Madame de Marimon, therefore my escort would be useless,' said Maxwell. 'Of course I am at Mademoiselle's service if law is necessary.'

'Too dangerous, eh, Maxwell? Gilbert, the challenge-glove is yours,' said Sir Gilbert.

'I take it up; and shall certainly carry through what I have begun,' retorted Gilbert, with a sharp, clear ring in his voice.

'And what does Elinor say?' asked Sir Gilbert.

All eyes were turned on the pale, drooping girl as she replied,—

'If only Aimée has no relapse, Gilbert might go; but I dread his absenting himself again. Her recovery is so slow and uncertain.'

'Then Aimée shall decide,' said Sir Gilbert; and so this little game of cross-purposes and crooked answers ceased for the hour.

CHAPTER XLIX.

'ONE FOR SORROW, TWO FOR MIRTH.'

'I BRING you Villy at last, my angel,' said Fay, putting her big sleek cat on Aimée's bed. 'He is assuredly a specimen of cathood of which there are few, for he leaves the loaves and fishes for emptiness ; but he returns willingly to thee, like the rest of us.'

Aimée put out her thin white hand to stroke the smooth black creature that walked daintily across her flowered counterpane to rub his nose against her face.

'Poor Villy !' whispered Aimée. 'How is his namesake ?'

'Oh, he is divinely discreet as ever—he makes me fear to call him *fiancé.* Indeed, I have been prudent of late, for I grow old, and have much to consider.'

Aimée smiled. She was almost as pale as when she lay entranced ; but there was light and life in her eyes and lips. Her voice came softly as a breeze, and her movements were noiseless as the summer grasses ; but she spoke and felt, and her friends rejoiced. Villy rolled himself up like a gigantic caterpillar, close to her cheek, and purred himself to sleep, purring still in dreamland ; and Fay seated herself on the bed.

'Thou art better, my angel ?'

'I am well, only so strangely weak—yet I have not been ill. How is it ?'

'It must be influenza, which goes through the house—even I, who am strong as a little horse, have the touch—see !—here !'

Fay began to sneeze and speak hoarsely.

'I have no cold, Fay—you improvise ; but I wish I knew where I have been so long.'

'Here, darling. *Ma foi*, we have all been here a few weeks, and it seems like years. Even Gilbert complains, though he says he prefers to rough it.'

'Why did Gilbert return from France ? He went there ?'

This whispered interrogation enchanted Fay, for it showed the dawning memory.

'He came to fetch me to make the acquaintance of the Marquise de Marimon. You remember, *mon ange ?*'

'Oh yes, I think so. Where is Gilbert ?'

A question was a wish to be fulfilled in the present crisis ; and Arbiter, who was at work in the room, left quietly. Gilbert shortly replaced her, trying to calm his ruffled temper as best he might. Aimée glanced from him to Fay. A restless tremor stole into her face.

'Did you see him ? did you tell him I am quite, quite well ?' she said gaspingly.

'He will not come till you ask for him ; he is glad you are better,' replied Gilbert.

She seemed relieved, and the trouble left her eyes.

'We were talking of France before you came in,' said Fay, eager to turn the subject. 'Tell Aimée of your journey.'

She looked at Gilbert and nodded, to assure him the topic was safe.

'What would you say if I were to go again for a day or so?' he asked cautiously; 'and—take Fay?'

'I would pray that it might not be long; partings are like death. But you will go?'

'Not if you dislike it. We will remain to quarrel here, instead of travelling there to quarrel—is it not, Gilbert?' replied Fay.

'I do not see why we should quarrel at all,' retorted Gilbert.

'Nor I, but you make the subjects. Aimée, the orchard is all apple-blossoms, and the cowslips are out.'

This sudden transition brought a touch of red to Aimée's cheek.

'I will bring you branches and bunches after luncheon,' continued Fay.

'And you will go to France and return quickly,' suggested Aimée, the flush deepening.

'By telegraph,' cried Gilbert and Fay at once, their eyes meeting.

In the afternoon Fay was in the orchard—pride of Green Oaks Cottage—straining after apple-blossoms. She was hatless, and the sun glinted through the branches on her gleaming hair and flushed face—a fair tenant of a fair dwelling. The ceiling was of pink and white, so delicately blent that the most artistic painter could not have limned it; the floor a mosaic of green and gold, so curiously inwrought that the chief of enamellers could not have copied it; a roof of apple-blossoms, a carpet of primroses. The westering rays pierced the leafy arch with difficulty, and fell aslant on trunks mossed with age, whence grew 'the mistletoe bough.' Amidst the gnarled roots, brightening decrepitude with beauty, grew primroses and ever primroses, interspersed with the more timid, but not more modest violet. Here and there blue circles peeped in between the eyelet-holes of the dome, as if to look at the flowers, and threw patches of light upon the shady, tesselated work beneath. The spring green was nearly hidden by the wealth of blossoms, and this homestead of nature was decked as for a wedding-day.

And surely Fay might have been the bride. Her silver-grey dress was soft, and fell about her carelessly as the blossoms about the trees, while the upturned face and upstretched arms were seeking the unattainable, even as the bride seeks happiness. She stood on tiptoe, her eyes sparkling, her lips parted, striving to reach a graceful branch far above her.

'The most beautiful are ever the highest!' she exclaimed, as it evaded her grasp.

She did not know that Gilbert was watching her, but he was never long where she was not. He thought her the loveliest flower of

Nature's perfect garden, and would have striven for her as she strove for the blossoms, but, like them, she evaded him. He dreaded to break the charm of her attitude, but even she could not stand so for ever, and she relinquished her effort, crying out,—

'I would climb the tree, but the branch is still too high. I fetch the ladder.'

'Let me get it,' said Gilbert, going towards her.

'You, *ma foi!*—you are not tall enough. You think you can do everything. He has it, I protest. I wish I were a man!'

'Why?'

'To climb to the top of everything.'

'And tumble down again. Better keep on the level.'

'But you are ambitious, sir.'

'Of what use? Fate or fortune turns me back every time I make a step. I have never in my life got what I wished for, and never shall.'

'Ah, you have the melancholics, as Stokes says when she has a pain. What do you most desire?'

'What another has won before me. Too late! too late!'

'I thought you would never say die—I would not, if I were a man.'

Fay looked up from the branch of apple-blossoms, and caught the fiery glance of love fixed upon her. What did it mean? Her *fiancé* had never looked at her so, nor had even Napoleon Hope, nor other, her adorers.

'Ah, you hinder me to gather Aimée's flowers,' she said quickly, stooping and recklessly pulling up primroses and violets. 'We shall never *faire fortune* if we idle our time, as the good books say. Did you ever make a cowslip ball?'

'Never. Hitherto I have had no time for idling.'

He spoke bitterly.

'*Ma foi*, how you change the tone? Come to the river, and see how the cowslip bells ring to its murmurs; then we will make the tisty-tosty for Aimée, round and big as Villy, *mon chat*.'

'How I hate the name Villy! Puerile—ridiculous! *He* would not be made an Achilles of to spin balls.'

'Ha, ha! *non!* He is even now too old and fat to play with them as he used. Why do kittens become cats, and men and women grow old? Come to the river.'

'Why leave the orchard? Nothing can be fairer, except, perhaps, its naughty occupant!'

'Now you compliment like Dr. Hope, and mean it as little. But the orchard is heavenly. Herefordshire, when the apple-trees bloom, is like a baby giant, with pink and white cheeks, and white snow-robes, dotted with coral,' 'Or, as seen from the Malvern hills, like a big bowl of strawberries and cream—so says your *fiancé*.'

'Ah, talk not of the strawberries! I have devoured them until Saar Gilbert said they grew out on my cheeks. Alas! we have none at the cottage!'

'You regret the Court, Fay. So do I. Oh to buy it back, and be the master of a joyous, thriving tenantry!'

'Boykin, you change again. Then you forgive the delicious Stokes and her accomplice Jim?'

'Vulgar, abominable woman! How can my father tolerate her?'

'Ah, how cross you are! You change again, and frighten me. I dare not go to France with you. I must ask my *fiancé*.'

'Pray do. I give you full permission.'

Gilbert turned away with a frown, but was soon recalled.

'Oh, go not, but come to the river, and see the cowslips dance, and ring their fairy bells.'

'You have no hat. You will be brown as a berry.'

'It is equal. I put my apron over my head. See, Aimée embroidered it in finest wool. Oh, she has the patience! Hold my basket while I arrange it *en capuchon*.'

She put her dainty little apron, with its trailing border of green leaves and scarlet berries, over her head, and it became, as by enchantment, the most coquettish of hoods.

'See, I am *coiffée à merveille*. We shall meet no one. There is a boat near the sweet new cottage that Saar Gilbert has built for Parker, who says he will quit it if the General is master, because he gives only ten shillings the week, and Saar Gilbert fifteen.'

'What is one to do? Pray come along to these dancing and ringing cowslips, Fay.'

Gilbert looked puzzled and gloomy, as Fay led the way down the orchard path, and through a meadow to the broad, glassy Wye. Here a field of nodding cowslips perfumed the air. They paused to gather and admire.

'England is certainly beautiful!' said Gilbert. 'I have seen sunsets on the great American rivers, but never any fairer than this. Look at yonder glow, for which there is no simile. See the water-lilies, the rushes, the trees, flooded by it, and again flooded in the river by reflection. Oh, Fay, it is hard lines to leave it, and return to America!'

Fay started, and laid her hand on Gilbert's arm. Her eyes gleamed with a sudden trouble.

'You are not going back? You cannot—you shall not!'

'I must. I can work there, here I must starve,' he said, covering the small hand with his.

They were silent, and Gilbert, watching Fay, saw tears in her eyes. She felt his look again, but did not understand it. She was still almost a child. She left her hand in his, and whispered, half shyly, half fondly,—

'Let us go to the boat and row into the light, *mon ami.* It will be a happy omen.'

They went, hand-in-hand. The boat was soon unmoored, and they were seated. Such scenes are often repeated in nature and fiction; still they are ever beautiful, as the love from which they spring. Gilbert paddling gently and looking at Fay; she, with her hood flowing and her gleaming eyes, gazing on the river. They reach the golden flood for which they make, and he rests his oars. There in the middle of the light, radiance above and below, the glory of the sun on meadow and bank, the glory of youth, strength, and beauty in their natures, they linger for Fay's happy omen. How tranquil, how perfect it is! Gilbert is about to speak, but Fay lays her finger on her lips, with a—

'Hush! Listen to the music. Break not the tender strain.'

The water whispers softly, the breeze breathes gently, even the birds seem for the moment hushed into half-inaudible song. Nothing moves but the tops of the rushes, and the smoke from the distant cottage.

'If she but loved me!' thought Gilbert. But what of Fay?

He spoke at last, sadly.

'Oh, Fay, I wish I had never seen you!'

'And I you, if you must quit us,' she sighed. '*Hélas!* it is fair and sad. But look—the omen!' She pointed to the trees that fringed the bank. 'Ah, it is for sorrow!' she added, clasping her hands.

A single magpie flew across the river above their heads.

'Look again, Fay,' said Gilbert.

'No; it is for mirth!' she cried, rising in eager delight, and almost upsetting the boat.

A second magpie joined his comrade right above them, and they perched together on the opposite bank.

'An anticlimax!' cried Gilbert, withdrawn from his temporary elysium.

But Fay was serious. She believed in the flight of birds, and watched for a second magpie with eager anxiety.

'And what is it, Fay?' asked Gilbert.

'One for sorrow, two for mirth, three for a wedding, four for a birth,' she said innocently.

'Let us wait for the third,' said Gilbert, again resting his oars. But no third appeared. 'We are to be mirthful, at least, which is something,' he added. 'And, Fay, they rest, and perhaps love, together. Can that be an omen for us?'

She was looking towards the birds; but he saw her cheek flush crimson. A moment more, and he would have forgotten his poverty, her uncertain birth, and many manly resolutions; but the scene changed, and was suddenly darkened for him.

'There is my *fiancé* and Saar Gilbert!' cried Fay, as those gentlemen appeared in the distance, sauntering along the river-side.

'Always your *fiancé*,' said Gilbert, seizing an oar, and beginning to row vigorously. 'What do you really think of him?'

'Of Monsieur Villy? Oh, he is a nonpareil! And you—what do you think of him?'

'That he is a very ordinary mortal.'

'Ha! You do not like him. You are cross again. Saar Gilbert! Monsieur Villy!'

Fay shouted, and attracted the walkers, who were engaged in grave discourse. They halted, and waited till the boat reached them. Gilbert leapt ashore, and, pretending to be engaged with its moorings, allowed Maxwell to help Fay out. His little romance was over, read through. Fay took Sir Gilbert's arm and whispered, 'He is cross as—as two sticks. Forget not the cowslips and the apple-blossoms,' she added, glancing back at Gilbert.

He brought her the basket of flowers, then loitered behind her and the others.

'A Neapolitan peasant!' said Sir Gilbert, glancing at Maxwell. 'You must have Italian blood in your veins, Fay. It is in your cheeks now. They are really burnt to flames!'

'Are they? Then Gilbert has set fire to them. We quarrel and make the peace, and make the peace and quarrel. We were talking of you, Monsieur Villy.'

'Of me! I am glad that any one should either think or talk of me. I am not used to such distinction,' returned Maxwell, annoyed.

'Oh, Monsieur Villy, I think of you much; and so does Winsome, the darling—don't you, Winsome? See, Gilbert, how Winsome loves me.'

She left Sir Gilbert to caress Maxwell's dog, as usual, at his heels. He jumped and fawned upon her, licked her hands, and showed decided tokens of affection. His master and Sir Gilbert walked on. Gilbert, who had heard the short colloquy, passed her indignantly, saying,—

'Even his dog!'

'What have I done?' asked Fay, following, the dog still jumping about her.

'Gilbert, Maxwell tells me that the General wants Great Oaks Farm as well as the rest,' said Sir Gilbert, turning round, and pausing till his son joined them. 'Happily for us, that remains in Mr. Moneypenny's hands, who will not loosen them for our amiable mortgagee. If he would let it me, I could turn farmer; only the people trouble me. One's virtues shine when one is dead and can no longer tarnish them. I have become a model landlord, master, squire, now that mine estate has passed away. I had another deputation this morning, while you were engaged with Generals and bell-ringers. They poured into the ears of my modesty that, if I would only *not* sell, they would welcome me as a beggar, before our master as prince. They assure me that, with you as land steward, I could clear off the debts in—say fifty years. I should be in the "land o' the leal," you an antiquated landholder; but you have won more golden opinions in six months at home than you did nuggets in six years abroad.'

'Then we die at least honourable men!' said Gilbert bitterly.

'And women. Elinor's reputation surpasses ours. She is truly our crown. The blessings of the poor are with her.'

Sir Gilbert's voice faltered, and Fay's arm was again within his. Maxwell was gazing on the sun, absently as a chained eagle, and thinking of the pale, sad face he had seen that morning. Sir Gilbert resumed, after a moment's silence,—

'I come to the river to drown either my useless self, or memory, and the people rush out, like the stars, "by twos and threes"—no, Fay, *not* like the bulrushes—and entreat me to live. We must go to America, and forget the old world in the new.'

'Do, father!' cried Gilbert energetically; 'half the farmers' and labourers' sons have already elected to go with me. They say there is nothing to be done in this overstocked England, and they don't care to face or join the strikes for wages. I could have founded a flourishing colony with a score of them. What do you say, Mr. Maxwell?'

'Better face the ills we know of,' was the reply.

'I could not stop here and see General Arlington reign where my father should be monarch; it would suffocate me to breathe the same air.'

'How different we are!' sighed Sir Gilbert. 'It would amuse me to watch his manœuvres, and speculate on his heirs—not hair, Fay; pray do not return to that worn-out jest. How charming you look in that *coiffure!*—hooded, but not hoodwinked. Will you go to America with—with us, or Boykin?'

Gilbert's eyes flashed upon Fay.

'You forget, Saar Gilbert; I go to France, if—if one of you will take me. If not, I go alone.'

She glanced from face to face.

'That matter is surely settled, since Miss Aimée makes no difficulties,' remarked Maxwell, meeting Gilbert's eyes. 'I thought Mr. Oreburn was to be *chaperon?*'

There was something antagonistic in the voice, which nettled the fiery Gilbert.

'We cannot coerce young ladies,' he said. 'Mademoiselle declines my escort, and I may be better engaged here in hastening on the lawyers than in France, where I shall be merely a *pis-aller*.'

'Look, Gilbert—look! Behold again our omen!' cried Fay, pointing upwards. 'The magpies follow us, and they are still together; so fly we to *la belle France*.'

Gilbert smiles, Fay claps her hands; they leave the golden river for the golden cowslip-field, pass through the rich mosaic of the orchard, and return to Green Oaks Cottage.

CHAPTER L.

FAY'S DEPARTURE.

AIMÉE is better, and it is settled at last. Fay and Gilbert are to start for the Continent, and the little household at the cottage is astir betimes. Fay's eager anxiety to go has returned with Aimée's vitality, and her wardrobe has been hastily ransacked for the most suitable travelling and other attire.

'I make myself adorable in the eyes of Madame la Marquise,' she says, as she appears at breakfast in becoming costume.

'I wish you wouldn't make yourself adorable in other people's eyes,' mutters Gilbert, aside.

'I may return—is it not, Saar Gilbert? Even if I discover my relations, I may come back?'

'To-morrow, if you will. We shall be dull as your uncle, the General, without you,' replies Sir Gilbert.

'I cannot eat, Elinor—impossible. Think of the weight of business which presses down my appetite. I have, firstly, to keep Mr. Oreburn in good temper; secondly, to make the agreeable to our fellow-passengers—for he says he hates to talk in a railway-carriage; thirdly, to enter London, which he describes as big and black; fourthly, to meet Sister Mary at the hotel—an encounter that I shrink from unavoidably; fifthly, to proceed to Dover—thence to Calais (I have already exhausted the fingers of one hand); sixthly, to enter Brittany—by which time Gilbert will have exhausted all his patience; tenthly (I skip the other fingers), to make the *révérence* to Madame la Marquise de Marimon. I have been already practising it before the glass, but I miss the cheval-glass of the Court. One sees only *à demi* in these antiquated mirrors, and they reflect at best unbecomingly.'

'You must drink this coffee. You see Gilbert is making a good breakfast,' urges Elinor.

'Impossible, *chérie*. Gilbert has only to see to my boxes; the weight of care falls on me. I go to take leave.'

She is soon in the garden, shaking hands with Jim, when Stokes bustles up with her cat.

'Here's Villy Mongshar, Ma'mselle, as have been at his maraudings again. I am staying at the Court till the young master's back's turned, then I shall come here for good. I'm not a-going to sacrifice Sir Gilbert for no Hamericay fancies. What's a Markiss, Ma'mselle? Harbiter says as it's 'igher than a Duchess.'

'Miles higher. Good-bye, you dear Stokes—good-bye, Jim; I have not a moment.'

She seizes Villy and rushes up-stairs, but calms as she reaches Aimée's room.

'I bring you Villy, Angel,' she continues, subdued. 'We shall be back in a few days. *Dieu te bénisse!*'

She stoops over Aimée and kisses her. It seems as if she could not take her warm red lips from the pale face. She has never parted from her before. She kisses her cat, already purring solemnly, and mutters—'Thou hast no feeling, ingrat!' then kisses Aimée again, down whose cheeks fruitful tears are flowing—tears they have panted to see ever since her illness. Then she passes Arbiter like a whirlwind, seizing her hand and wrenching it—for even she becomes dear at that moment; and finally bursts into floods of tears in the passage.

'Fay, we shall lose the train!' shouts Gilbert.

She runs down-stairs.

'Oh, Saar Gilbert! oh, Elinor! I cannot go—indeed, indeed, I cannot!' she cries, throwing her arms round Elinor.

'Fay, the fly is at the door,' shouts Gilbert.

'He will swallow me up before I return,' she exclaims. 'You must be the last—the very last, Saar Gilbert.'

Another embrace, and they are all at the gate.

'There is Monsieur Villy! he comes to see us off!' she cries, and too surely Maxwell arrives.

'I have to see Customs at ten, and I thought you would give me a lift to the station,' he says, addressing Gilbert, whose brow contracts with annoyance.

'Certainly. Pray get in, Fay,' cries Gilbert, turning to say good-bye to his father and Elinor.

There is a look of pain on Elinor's face.

'Cheer up, Elinor,' whispers Gilbert. 'Do not suppose that a low lawyer can annoy me.'

He stands at the fly door and motions Maxwell to get in first; but Maxwell has either overheard, or sees that something is amiss, and mounts the box, saying, as he lifts his hat to Elinor, 'There would not be room for the bandboxes.'

'Do not blow his brains out before the affairs are settled,' laughs Sir Gilbert to his son, who has assumed an air of haughty indifference. 'Adieu, *ma petite.*'

'Adieu, Saar Gilbert; good-bye, *mon Baronète*,' sobs Fay, as Tom closes the door.

Sir Gilbert and Elinor watch Fay's waving handkerchief until the fly is out of sight, then return to the house.

'I hope Gilbert is not really in love with her, for I believe Maxwell has the best chance,' said Sir Gilbert. 'How easily love makes excuses, and even finds old Customs a blind! Seriously, Elinor, is Gilbert *épris?*'

'I think so, papa.'

'And Maxwell?'

'I do not know.'

'I wish things were different,' sighed Sir Gilbert. 'I should like the child to be really my daughter; but, if she prefers the other, he is the best *parti*. He is a rising man, clever and dependable, and will probably have the Castle. Life seems against us all—even Gilbert, who fights it bravely.'

'Oh, papa!' said Elinor, looking up into Sir Gilbert's face with a wistful longing.

'It must end, *ma fille!*' he said, half playfully. '"All comes to those who can wait," even if Death be the *all.*'

He kissed her forehead and left her. How little he or any one else understood her! She remained a moment gazing out of the window, then went to Aimée.

'How strange to be quite alone again, as at first!' whispered Aimée. 'Papa, you, and I. Yet how different we all are! My spirit seems to have changed within me. Have you seen our aunt or Miss Maxwell?'

'Not since they were here. Miss Maxwell has been ill.'

'Ah!' sighed Aimée, passing her hand before her eyes. 'I wish you would go and ask for her. I can spare you, dear, for I am better. My memory clears. Where has it been?'

This was Aimée's frequently repeated question. While passively yielding her body to her nurses, her mind was bewildered with doubt.

'You have been ill, darling, and great weakness affects the memory,' said Elinor gently.

'I suppose so. I am much confused concerning Dr. Hope; but I shall see him again when my mind is less clouded. I have a curtain before my brain, that seems hung between it and sight. Is it not strange?'

'Perhaps you had better not talk of it. Gilbert and Fay will soon be at the station, and then their real journey and trial will begin.'

'Dear Boykin! Dear Fay! See how her Villy sleeps!'

The sisters talked on, and imperceptibly comforted each other. In the afternoon, Elinor went to the Castle to return her aunt's call. She asked her father to go with her, but he said that, not being Mahomet, as Mrs. Moneypenny suggested, he could not go to the mountain, until the mountain had been to him. Maxwell overtook her at the lodge. He had just returned from his visit to the lawyers. Did they both remember that far-away morning when he had brought her to Castle House in search of Fay? Whether or not, she was their first subject of conversation. Maxwell said that he had seen her and Gilbert off, and that she had recovered her spirits. His manner was always constrained with Elinor, and not unnaturally. A man never forgives a woman for refusing him.

'Mr. Oreburn will make the Marquise amenable, if any one can,' he said. 'He has resolution and excellent French. He has, besides, more influence over Mademoiselle than any one else.'

'Than *any* one else?' repeated Elinor, glancing into his face.

'I think so,' he replied, understanding her meaning, and slightly resenting it.

He was keen-sighted, and knew that Sir Gilbert considered him Fay's lover; though he did not know that Elinor also believed it. They walked on in silence, broken at last by a chance remark on the weather. They reached the house. As they stood at the door, he could not resist saying,—

'How well I remember that morning when you came here once before, Miss Oreburn! It has cast its shadow on my life.'

As soon as the words were out, he wished to recall them; but Elinor replied simply,—

'I am sorry. Life has so many shadows.'

In another moment they were in the well-remembered breakfast-room, with Mrs. Moneypenny and Lizzie.

'So glad to see you, my dear! Then Sir Gilbert wouldn't come, after all? I told Moneypenny so. How is your sister—that sweet Aimée, who is the image of her mother—and what caused her sudden illness? I have been to inquire every day, but the gates were so besieged with the poor, and the door with the rich, that there was no getting an answer.'

This was the aunt's voluble greeting.

'Aimée is better, and sends her love. We hear that Miss Maxwell has also been ill,' said Elinor, and turned to Lizzie, who stood apart, cold, pale, and stern. Her brother's keen eyes were upon her.

'Thank you, I am well,' she replied, touching Elinor's hand. 'Is it true that your sister was insensible for days?'

She asked this in a hard voice, that struck painfully on Elinor, who answered, as distantly as she could, 'Yes, but she is recovering.'

'What brought it on?'

'We do not know. Fay found her ill, and she continued so.'

Lizzie was satisfied, and asked no more questions. Elinor remarked a stern, pained look on her brother's face, and wondered that a mother's death could leave traces so hard.

Miss Whiston arrived, brimful of news; even Elinor's presence could not check its overflow.

'What do you think I have just heard, Miss Oreburn?' she began. 'That your brother and Fay have gone off to be married.'

'I think members of our family need scarcely leave Ashton to be married. My brother has taken Fay to an old acquaintance of ours—the Marquise de Marimon.'

'Oh, indeed! I hope Fay will prove her parentage. It is awkward for a handsome girl to have no relations. Mrs. Hope is dangerously ill, and she and the General are tearing the unfortunate Septimus to pieces between them. The poor fellow can't call his soul his own.'

Lizzie's sombre face kindled suddenly, and she became interested. This was not lost on her brother or Elinor.

'Now is your time, Lizzie,' continued the obtuse gossip. 'Septimus has won the day, and will have the Manor. That is your fault, Miss Oreburn.'

'I'm sure we don't want Septimus Hope,' said Mrs. Moneypenny hotly, while Lizzie's face darkened again. 'He may have all the manors, and Generals, and professions that ever came into the world since the flood, and welcome, but he won't have *us*, I can tell him.'

More callers arrived, and Elinor took her leave, not quite pleased with her first ceremonious visit to her mother's sister.

She resolved to go and inquire for Mrs. Hope.

When she reached the Kennels, she saw General Arlington's carriage at the gate. She smiled as she thought it was awaiting the luckless doctor. As she was shown into the big, untidy sitting-room, she was greeted by the words, 'Here you are at last!—I thought you were never coming!' and stood face to face with General Arlington.

The meeting was awkward, but Elinor was the most self-possessed of the two. At first she resolved not to speak to him, then, changing her mind, advanced and held out her hand. She knew this was pride, not humility, but he did not. He pressed her hand fiercely. Was it love or hate? She did not sit down, but said, with her calm, proud manner,—

'I came to inquire for Mrs. Hope.'

'And I am delighted to see you, Miss Oreburn,' he rejoined, evidently nervous and flurried. 'I have been wanting to meet you ever since'— There was a pause, but, recovering himself, he soon resumed—'ever since that letter from your father. Did he coerce you?'

'No.'

'Then why did you lead me to suppose you would marry me? I consider myself ill-used.'

'You!' exclaimed Elinor, not even yet understanding her old lover's utter selfishness and self-esteem.

'Yes, I, of course, Miss Oreburn. As I was saying, you as good as promised to marry me, if I would wait, you know; and I did wait, indeed am still waiting, if you have changed your mind.'

'Coerced by you, I promised never to marry while you lived, and I bitterly repent my cowardice,' said Elinor haughtily. 'You have, indeed, visited it upon me and my father.'

'Ah! It is all his own fault, and as I am as ready now as ever to fulfil my engagement, and love you as devotedly as ever, and have no intention of marrying any one else, and would even at this eleventh hour stay proceedings, I cannot release you from your part of the engagement, you know.'

Elinor turned very white. He looked at her half fiercely, half fondly.

'If only you will change your mind! I could overlook everything, even that girl's effrontery, you know.'

'Change my mind!' said Elinor at last, with an effort. 'Whom do you take me for, General Arlington? Remember that I am Sir Gilbert Oreburn's daughter.'

'The fool! It is he who influences you. But a promise is a promise, and I will keep mine if you will resist your father.'

The door opened, and Dr. Hope entered. He speedily mastered the position of affairs.

'How is your mother, Dr. Hope? I came to inquire for her, hearing that she is ill,' said Elinor quickly, in a voice trembling with indignation.

'She is very ill, dangerously so. I could not leave her,' he replied.

Elinor left the room with a haughty bend to the General, and Dr. Hope followed.

'How is Miss Aimée?' he asked.

'Better. She has expressed a wish to see you. Tell your mother I have called,' replied Elinor hastily, and hurried from the house as from some terrible fate.

CHAPTER LI.

THE WEAK STRONG; THE STRONG WEAK.

THE strong are sometimes cowardly, the weak brave. Tried by the test of circumstances, the feeble may triumph where the vigorous would fail. Aimée, depressed in body, but elevated in spirit, had appointed a meeting with Dr. Hope; he, powerful of nerve, but poor of soul, kept the appointment. He believed he was about to receive forgiveness and the assurance of affection from her whom he loved; she prayed to be permitted to influence him aright. She lay pale and calm when he entered, as one scarcely recovered from mortal sickness. She had not left her room, and had been moved to her couch near the open window. Flowers and books were on her small table as usual, but the drawing materials were absent, for she could not as yet exert herself. She had told Elinor that she wished to see him alone, partly to make amends for her seeming ingratitude, and partly —here she had paused, and Elinor, knowing how bewildered her mind was, left the blank unfilled.

Dr. Hope took her hand gently—tenderly; but he felt that her manner and touch were cold. He could not speak. Words failed him for the first time. She pointed to a chair near her, and, when he was seated, asked quietly for his mother. He said she was in a precarious state, but he hoped she would recover.

'I am sorry you are unhappy,' she said. 'I am grieved to have seemed unkind, but I have been strangely ill, and perhaps am not responsible.'

'I am no longer unhappy now that I am again with you,' he replied. 'I was wretched, indeed, when you refused to see me. You know that I desired to watch over you as—as—your friend?'

'I know you have been good to me, and I shall ever be most grateful. But I would rather not speak of myself. I am thinking of another.'

'Oh that it were of me!' he exclaimed passionately, looking into her calm eyes.

'Partly of you,' she said, a trouble stealing into them.

'You have forgiven what I said to you long ago?' he asked, in the old flattering tones.

'I hope so—I think so—but'—

'Hear me before you finish, dear child. Let me call you so again, as you used when I saw you first. I could not hurt you or renew your pain for worlds, but when I told you how dearly I loved you, I only said what I felt, and shall feel to the end of time.'

He took her hand, but she withdrew it.

'You should not speak to me so, Dr. Hope. I—I have seen Miss Maxwell, and I know all,' she said.

Her voice was faint, but steady, yet the words brought a flush to her white face. He started back, turned red, pale, red again; rose, sat down; and finally gazed on Aimée. But her eyes rested on her now folded hands, and her soul was engaged in prayer. There was a long silence. He broke it.

'What is the all?' he asked hoarsely.

'That you are pledged to her, and should never have spoken to me of love.'

'I am not pledged to her. It is a lie!'

'Hush! Pray—pray do not deny the truth.'

'That childish folly is past, never to return. I swear to you we are not engaged. If there were ever any relations between us, they have ceased.'

'She does not think so.'

'She does—she must. What can she have said to you, a stranger, to cause this sudden change? Unfeminine! Indelicate!'

'Not so, Dr. Hope. Simply driven to despair. I have read that passion may conquer reason.'

'Temper, not passion. Her temper is uncontrollable. Surely you will not let an extravagant girl overthrow our—our friendship? You are all the world to me.'

He spoke with passionate feeling, only too real. Aimée put her hand before her eyes.

'Do not, if you please. You must not. I am not yet strong.'

He knew it, and controlled himself. He saw that she was trembling.

'Aimée,' he resumed gently, 'if ever I spoke truth, I am speaking it now. There is nothing between Miss Maxwell and me. Oh, let me recover the old place in your mind—let me at least watch over you again—restore you to health.'

'When you have righted the wrong you have done *her*, it may be as you wish, perhaps; but I do not know. I am not competent to judge between you—but God is; and you must act by her as in His sight. It pains me to the heart to have come between you. I do not think it was my fault. I have said to my heavenly Father that I meant no harm.'

'Aimée, you drive me mad. I hope never to see her again. I despise, abhor her, and all is over between us. I love now for the first time, and it shall be the last. You or no other.'

He again forgot her weakness in excitement, and raised his voice from the subdued tone he had assumed. Hers grew lower; she clasped her hands, and looked at him imploringly.

'My strange affliction should be my safeguard against this temptation,' she whispered. 'It is sore even to me.'

'You are better, and with me would be well. I shall be rich, equal with you in position, enabled to ask you of your father, if you will only give me hope, and wait.'

'I have been better, thanks to you and a higher Physician. I may be better again, if He wills. But you--you must forget me, and return to her to whom you are still bound by honour and first love.'

Again she met his passionate glance unflinchingly, and her voice strengthened. The spirit was stronger than the framework.

'My *first* love would be hard to find—my last is not enigmatical,' he said sarcastically. '*She* is neither the one nor the other. You'—

His change of manner reassured Aimée, and she interrupted him.

'*I* could never take what of right belongs to another,' she said.

'Then, by heaven, if you mean my love, no other but you shall have it. I will bide my time; but I will never give you up.'

'You must. I had hoped that persuasion and conscience would have convinced you; but I judged you worthier than you are. Duty fades before a passing fancy.'

'You call it fancy! Aimée, you have grasped my soul, and if you cast me off, you will be answerable for my eternal destruction.'

Tempters know their work. Dr. Hope knew his. This was Aimée's tenderest chord. The soul of another! She did not speak for awhile, and he watched the nervous twitching of her white eyelids, lips, and hands anxiously. He leaned his elbow on her table, and his face was half shaded by his hand. Evil was overmastering his small sense of good, and his mind darkened into Mephistophelian night. Not so Aimée's, for hers was strengthened and enlightened by prayer. She spoke again, slowly, thoughtfully, reverently.

'The soul is God's. It is immortal. His spirit purifies it. His breath sustains it. I can pray for you—I will—I have; but I have no power over your soul, or you over mine. The All-knowing will save you, if you ask Him.'

'And *if* I ask Him, will you then take pity on me?'

'You will then need no human pity, for He will strengthen you to repent, and make amends for the ill you have done.'

'If I made the amends you mean, I and she would be miserable, and separated soon. I could never forgive one who came betwixt you and me.'

'Then may God forgive you! I have seen you, alas! in vain.'

'Say not in vain. You have taught me what little good I know, and, before all, taught me to love. But you—you forget the hours we have passed together—the books, talk, sickness, returning health, glimpses of mind, revelations of heart, joy of meeting, grief at parting, devoted care, tenderness, love. And all because a jealous rival steps between us. For you loved me.'

He rose in his excitement, whilst she, growing paler, yet stronger, spoke. There were tears in her eyes when she looked at him—his were gleaming as with fire.

'I forget nothing. Memory returns in spite of strange delusions, and with memory, gratitude. You have done much for me. I thank you. Would I could think of you as once I did!'

The dignity awed him. The pale, calm, tearful girl restrained the powerful, deceitful man.

'You shall. Give me time; but oh, do not give me up!'

The sudden simplicity and pathos touched poor Aimée. He was in earnest for the moment.

'I will hope and pray; but now you will leave me, for I grow faint.'

Habit mastered passion. He was the cool doctor again. He felt that he had another chance, and, fixing his eyes on her, said, with decision,

'You must not give way.'

Then he took some medicine from a neighbouring table and brought it to her. She swallowed it obediently, but, recovering her self-possession, pointed to the door.

'If you would kindly send Elinor,' she said.

'Yet one moment,' he cried desperately. 'Bear with me for my love. If I ask *her* to marry me, and she refuse me, will you think of me again as of old? Will you forgive me, and be mine?'

'I shall never marry. If I recover, I shall devote my life to my father and to God.'

He stood gazing at her. She must be the angel Fay had named

He took it, kissed it fervently, and was gone.—*Page* 313.

her, if indeed angels were passionless as pure. He knelt down by her.

'Forgive me,' he said.

'I have nothing to forgive. Ask her you have offended.'

Her low voice trembled, and she put out her hand. He took it, kissed it fervently, and was gone.

Passionless! No; but mortal. Could he have seen the burst of tears that followed him, he would have hoped still. She clasped her hands, and asked God for strength for herself, penitence for him.

Elinor found her thus. He had passed out with a strange 'Go to her,' and no other salutation.

'Darling! what is the matter? What has he said?'

'Nothing. Do not question me, for I cannot answer even you.'

Elinor sat down where he had sat, and took the cold hand. She let the tears and sobs have way, and did not speak. Her own experience taught her what must have befallen her sister, but she felt that the grief was for him, not for herself. After a long silence, she said,—

'I understand, darling! He has pained you by telling of a fruitless love. He should not have spoken to you now.'

Aimée pressed her sister's hand, and made no reply. Both knew that there were secrets between them that they panted to tell, but dared not. Why is it that the deepest hearts suffer most? But Aimée's brave spirit soon mastered the frail body, and when the tears ceased to flow she was better—indeed they had done her good, for she slept naturally, while Elinor still held her hand.

CHAPTER LII.

MADAME LA MARQUISE DE MARIMON.

IN these days every one who has not visited Brittany has read endless books about it, so we will not retard the course of this English tale by attempting a description of a Breton château. Suffice it that Gilbert and Fay have passed the *portes cochères* of the ancient Castle of Marimon, have driven up to the door, dismounted from their *fiacre*, and been ushered into a large, quaint room, furnished with the customary appliances of such noble dwellings. They have inquired for the Marquise, and heard that she is better, and expecting them; and they are left alone. Fay has fulfilled her threat, and 'made herself adorable.' She has on a dark blue travelling dress, over which she has thrown a crimson cloak of some light material, and a broad-brimmed straw hat, trimmed also with blue, into which she has stuck a crimson chestnut flower, gathered *en route* by Gilbert. She carries a large travelling-bag, worked by Elinor and Aimée in many-coloured wools, and grounded in her favourite crimson. This contains her photographs, and some of the contents of the Chinese work-box. She is standing almost in the centre of the polished floor, one finger on her lip, one foot forward, surveying the scene. She looks eminently picturesque.

There is a wood fire on the large hearth, and Gilbert has planted himself near it, and is leaning against the huge, elaborately-carved mantelpiece, surveying her, and glancing occasionally at the door. He looks distinguished enough, with his easy carriage, proud head, thick auburn hair and beard, resolute eyes, loose grey suit, and assumed indifference. They are a handsome pair!

'Hush! I recall the scene!' gasps Fay. 'She sat in that great carved chair by the fire—a white poodle—a—hark! Gilbert, my heart beats in my mouth! I hear a step. Here she is!'

Gilbert went to Fay, and, standing beside her, still watched the door.

'Sit down, Fay.'

'I cannot. I hear the lock turn. I tremble. Stand by me, Gilbert.'

'Always—if you will let me.'

The door opens.

'Here she is! It is she!' gasps Fay, as a tall and stately dame walks slowly in.

She stands, distant half the long room, to look at them. Gilbert advances to meet her. He salutes her on both cheeks, and says, in perfect French,—

'Charmed to see you again, Madame la Marquise. You will scarcely remember me, for I have been long a stranger to *la belle France;* but you will recall my father. Your health is re-established? Allow me to present Miss Arlington.'

He leads the Marquise de Marimon towards Fay, still standing irresolute. They look at one another some time without speaking. They are of the same height, have the same dark, flashing eyes, the same black hair—are both French, in short. But the Marquise is stern, thin, sallow, erect, elderly; Fay impulsive, bright, lithe, and young.

'It is the same!' cries Fay at last, glancing at Gilbert.

'She resembles! Oh, *mon Dieu!*' ejaculates the Marquise, controlling some almost irrepressible emotion. 'Your name?' she adds, fixing her eyes on Fay.

'Félicité Gabrielle de Saint Ange.'

At this name the Marquise nearly fell; but they supported her to a chair, and she recovered after awhile.

'Forget my weakness,' she said, again fixing her eyes on Fay. 'Whence have you those names?'

'Félicité Gabrielle from my mother; De Saint Ange from my dear father.'

'Do you remember your parents?'

'My mother, no; my father, yes. It was he who brought me to this place years ago, after the death of my mother.'

'You remember this house, then? And me!—do you recall me?'

'As in a dream, Madame. I see you with a white dog, that barked at me; I see the apartment; I see you wave me from you when I screamed; I see a woman in a high white cap take me away; and I hear reproachful words. Those are my memories, Madame. I awake from them, and am with my father.'

Fay spoke with a dignified simplicity, and waved her hands from the Marquise to the door, as in illustration. The elder lady coughed slightly, and turned away her head. She met Gilbert's eyes, and raised her hands and shoulders expressively.

'And the photographs that Monsieur has had the kindness to send me?' she resumed, coughing again, and facing Fay.

'I have them—they are of my father and mother.'

Fay produced the likenesses.

'One moment. I have recognised them, and wish not to see them again at present. I am still feeble, and trifles excite me.'

Fay laid them on a table, and took an envelope and some of the contents of her mother's work-box from her bag. Drawing a yellow paper from the envelope, she knelt down by the Marquise, and placed it carefully on her lap.

'Excuse me, Madame, but I have mended it with such difficulty that I fear to disarrange the pieces. They are important; and you may recognise the writing. The signature is imperfect, but we imagine the letter to be one of reproach from a relative of my mother's. These ancient relics were with it.'

Fay held the gold thimble and silver bodkin-case in her hand. The Marquise glanced from them to the letter, and seemed overcome with some emotion. Fay and Gilbert watched her as she read, the one on her knees, the other with his light, protective touch ready to encourage her he loved. The Marquise continued long absorbed, her fingers on the torn yellow letter, her grand head bent over it. At last a large tear fell on the discoloured sheet.

'Dear Madame,' whispered Fay, laying her hand on the trembling hand of the Marquise, who looked up dreamily at the girl, and said, slowly and emphatically,—

'Yes, I am the writer of that letter—I, Gabrielle Marguerite de Marimon. She was my unfortunate daughter. And you?'

Fay started wildly.

'And I? Oh, Madame, your heart tells you, as does mine.'

'You are my unfortunate grandchild.'

Again the black eyes met, no longer fierce, but moist with tears. Fay's impulsive French nature prevailed over the English reserve she had armed herself with. She threw her arms round the Marquise, exclaiming,—

'Not unfortunate, Madame, but oh, most fortunate!'

The aged lady leaned over her and burst into tears. Gilbert walked quietly to a distant window. His part was done; still he watched the kneeling, sobbing Fay, the bent, agitated Marquise. Strong emotion has no words—they had none – not even Fay, usually so ready. When she moved at last, her hat was off, her hair loose her face flushed. The Marquise looked at her.

'I see thee again, my Félicité—my too unhappy daughter!' she said.

'Happy for ever now,' cried Fay, rising, and kissing the wet cheeks.

There was something almost like a sob in the window. Fay heard it.

'Gilbert, *mon ami*, come here. He is our guardian angel,' she said, leaving the Marquise, and going to Gilbert.

He took the outstretched hands, and smiled through something very like a tear. They returned together to the Marquise, who had recovered some degree of composure.

'Is it a dream or reality?' she said. 'You are the son of my friend and neighbour, Monsieur le Chevalier d'Oreburn—Gilbert, the boy who left for America.'

'The son of my benefactor, Madame—of him who adopted me when all forsook me,' replied Fay excitedly.

'Sit down and tell me,' said the bewildered lady, looking from one to the other.

They sat down and recounted the sad story of Fay's childhood, and the brighter one of her girlhood.

Then the Marquise told her tale; and now they recognised one of the old *noblesse*, the fire of whose pride had not died out with years, and whose stately carriage and flashing eyes spoke of an imperious past.

'Félicité Gabrielle was my only daughter; the youngest child of my widowhood. My sons were in the army, and we lived alone. She was like you, and reputed handsome and clever. They say I was severe with her; if so, it was for her good, for I loved her tenderly. Still she confided not in me, for her nature was reserved. Be open, child—be candid.'

'I am, Madame. I can retain no secrets; is it not, Gilbert?' said Fay.

'Good,' continued the Marquise, with a piercing glance at Fay's animated face. 'There came to the village of Marimon a Monsieur de Saint Ange.'

'*Mon cher père!*' interrupted Fay.

The Marquise waved her hand irritably.

'He rendered my daughter and me the service of stopping our horses on one occasion when we were in danger of an overset, and we were his obliged. I believed him a gentleman of the *ancien régime;* he gave us to understand that he was of the family of the Saint Anges; noble and poor. I invited him to the château. He came; not often, for I misdoubted his peculiar French, and made inquiries, resulting in uncertainty. He left the village, and shortly afterwards my daughter disappeared. I was in despair, the neighbourhood in alarm, my people roused. There came a letter from her, announcing herself the wife of Monsieur de Saint Ange, asking my pardon. Pardon! I wrote her the letter you have thus ingeniously restored.'

'You were severe, Madame!' said Fay.

'I was—deservedly severe. I heard your father was a *roué* and a gambler. I never saw my daughter more.'

The Marquise sat erect, and her softened countenance grew stern.

'How sad and strange!' cried Fay, clasping her hands.

'It was. Scarcely four years had passed when I received a letter from your father telling me of her death. *Mon Dieu!* I was furious.'

'*Pauvre père! pauvre mère!*' ejaculated Fay, instinctively glancing at Gilbert, whose sympathetic yet angry eyes met hers.

'I will be just. His letter was that of one overwhelmed with remorse and grief. I burnt it. But he wrote of you, and my maternal instinct prompted me to see my daughter's daughter. None knew of the marriage, not even my sons. They believed their sister withdrawn to a vocation in conventual life.'

'Deceitful! cruel!' ejaculated Fay.

'Deceitful, yes; cruel, no: for the De Marimon is unsullied. I wrote to your father as I felt, upbraiding him severely. Again I will be just; he bore it without resentment, as one who knew he had sinned past forgiveness. Then I requested to see you, and he left you secretly at the château.'

'You did not admit him, Madame?' asked Fay reproachfully.

'Him! No, a thousand times, no!' replied the Marquise angrily. 'Think you I could see the destroyer of my daughter?'

'Madame la Marquise, he was my father!' said Fay, erect as her grandmother.

'Pardon. True. You were not then as you are now. You were brought to me by force, screaming, struggling, fighting even, for your liberty—and for your father. I had never seen so furious a child.

But for the likeness, I should have misdoubted our relationship, for —excuse me, Mademoiselle—there was no nobility, no aristocracy.'

'If I now possess any, Madame, I owe it to the father of Monsieur, and his daughters, my benefactors. In my case the *savoir-faire* has been acquired, not transmitted!'

Fay glanced at Gilbert, and spoke excitedly.

'We are truly their debtors!' said the Marquise, bending low. 'But, as I understand, your father's family are not, as I feared, of the *bourgeoisie*—on the contrary, approaching our class. The union is no longer a *mésalliance*. However, of that hereafter. You remained in this château scarcely a day and night, when we lost you. We searched for you in vain, but were reassured on learning that a man resembling M. de Saint Ange had been seen seeking something. Henceforth we heard no more of him or you.'

'Doubtless you considered yourself fortunate. We were then but *roturiers*,' said Fay warmly.

'Possibly. Still my conscience has been troubled, and I have suffered mortification and penance on your account.'

'A thousand thanks, Madame; I am still so far from immaculate that you may find them yet necessary.'

The Marquise smiled.

'Thou art at least honest, my child,' she said, with a sudden change of manner, which so nearly resembled Fay's as to startle Gilbert.

'I think you may be assured of that, Madame,' he said. 'May I be permitted to ask how you propose to prove this marriage, since your daughter is supposed to have died single, in a convent, as I understand?'

'It will be difficult; but we must say that she has been privately united by dispensation to an English gentleman, without the consent of her family.'

'Can you tell where the marriage took place?' asked Gilbert eagerly. 'The object of General Arlington and his clique is to disprove it.'

'I cannot. I was too enraged to inquire.'

'Are you sure they were married? *That man* denies it!' cried Fay, starting up and clasping her hands excitedly.

'Are we not of the De Marimon?' proudly, grandly, unquestioningly said the Marquise.

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders and muttered, 'We are precisely where we were.'

This, however, could scarcely be; for Fay was unhesitatingly acknowledged, received, adopted, so to say, by her grandmother, who, although she might forsake her daughter, believed in her honour as in her own.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE VICAR PREACHES REPENTANCE.

WHILE Fay was received and introduced as grand-daughter of the Marquise de Marimon, and while Gilbert was ransacking registers to prove her birth, General Arlington was ill. Real anxiety and excitement had mastered imaginary ailments, and had given Dr. Hope reason to believe that his tenure of life, and therewith wealth, was more insecure than he feared. That admirable gossip, Miss Whiston, had told the General that Fay was really gone to France, to some relations who knew her parents, and he trembled lest she should return and blazon forth her connection with himself. The village Mercury had also let him understand that people were inclined to side with Sir Gilbert in the property and mortgage question, and that he would not appear to the world quite as clean as he did to himself. Moreover, those absurd bells haunted him, and therewith the ghosts of the old Sir Gilbert and Social Stokes, his whilom coachman. He knew they were absurd, but all sorts of absurdities crop up with doses of morphine—for his doctor was compelled to quiet his nerves and reduce his irritability by these nocuous draughts.

It must be confessed that Dr. Hope's period of expectancy was not without its thorns. These pricked him on all sides; still he concealed the smart under a placid and bland exterior, whenever the General required his care. And when did he not require it? In vain he managed *petits diners* and evening rubbers; the days had to be disposed of, and friends, however interested, would not listen to his complaints for more than an hour at a time. He found Mr. Tenderton a safe and kindly aid, for that good man was always ready to help a parishioner, and desirous of benefiting the General.

One day the invalid was unusually fretful, and the doctor had an unusually difficult task.

'Now, Septimus, you can't want to leave me. Your mother is better, you have given up that hysterical Miss Oreburn, Miss Maxwell is well, and you have no other patients, you know,' he said irritably.

'I have a letter from Mr. Customs, requesting my immediate presence. He says the deeds are ready, awaiting only the signatures,' rejoined the doctor.

'What can he want you for? It is no good for me to sign till that confounded prig, young Oreburn, returns; and perhaps I shan't sign after all, you know. I'm not sure I want the Court—I hate it! I say, I wish you would marry *that girl*. Suppose they find the certificates?'

'We know they cannot. And what would my marrying serve?'

'Perhaps she would hold her tongue then, and let me have a little peace. She is handsome enough to satisfy any man, and has the impudence of an Amazon. I wish I had taken her in at first—I say, I do, Septimus, you know.'

'You would have been in your grave by this time, General.'

'Perhaps I should. You don't think me dangerously ill, eh?'

'By no means. You are much better to-day than yesterday—pulse stronger, tongue cleaner, voice clearer. Ah, there is the Vicar.'

'The Vicar!—who wants him! He's always here. One would think I was going to die.'

Mr. Tenderton entered, having been appointed by the doctor.

'I will take advantage of Mr. Tenderton's visit to run over and see Customs,' said Dr. Hope. 'Train 2.25. I can be back again to dinner.'

'Why can't Customs come here? I'm sure I pay enough for you both to have at least one at a time,' said the General.

'And you pay me tithes, so I must have my turn,' remarked the Vicar cheerfully.

'I shall expect you by the six o'clock train,' said the General, as the doctor slipped away.

Mr. Tenderton managed to amuse the patient for an hour or so, when Stalker, his valet, brought his medicine, and advised a nap before dinner.

'You will not go till Septimus returns, Vicar? I cannot be left alone,' said the General.

'Certainly not,' replied Mr. Tenderton, who had been invited to dinner, and who took a bundle of papers from his pocket.

The General slept till the half-hour bell rang, and awoke in a better humour. He seemed rather pleased than otherwise to see Mr. Tenderton reading over his MS. sermon, and even made a joke to the effect that he had brought him the first dose of it. Dr. Hope did not return, and they went to dinner without him.

'I knew he couldn't be back in time,' said the General cheerfully, and prepared to eat an unsuperintended meal.

He certainly ate and drank himself into unusual composure; and when the servants had withdrawn, and he and the Vicar were left alone, became quite confidential. He could never keep himself long from the subjects at his heart, and, finding a willing and sympathetic listener, entered upon them more fully than he had ever done before. The absence of his doctor was a relief to him, and the servants winked significantly as he swallowed many prohibited viands, and seemed the better for them.

'I feel quite myself to-night—haven't been so well for weeks. Another glass, Vicar? No finer wine in the county,' he said, peering through his wine-glass in the inquisitive way common to men.

Mr. Tenderton helped himself, and praised the wine.

'What is stirring in the parish? Is it true that Moneypenny has usurped Great Oaks Farm?' asked the General.

'I think not,' replied the Vicar. 'Sir Gilbert tells me he intends to live there himself when Morton's lease is out.'

'In the centre of my property!—the pig-headed, useless, extravagant, conceited coxcomb!'

'Hush, General! Remember I must defend my flock. I find him a clever, generous gentleman.'

'Easy enough to be generous on other people's money. Do you know that I have 'em all under my thumb at last—that the Court is mine—the Manor is mine—the great tithes are mine! Ha, ha!'

'What can you do with so much, General? I find my small glebe more than I can manage, and often think of the rich man in the parable, who built him barns and granaries, and when about to take his rest, was called suddenly to his account.'

'An extreme case—a very extreme case. What can have become of Septimus?'

'He will probably be here by the last train. I don't think it an extreme case. Any self-sufficient man is just as liable to be so summoned. Death is a solemn certainty.'

'Of course—we all know that. What would you have had him do? There was no harm in being rich, you know.'

'Repent—make restitution—sell his goods, and feed the poor.'

The General moved uneasily, took up his glass, put it down again, and finally said doggedly,—

'Perhaps he had nothing to repent of—no restitution to make.'

The Vicar looked at him thoughtfully. He intended nothing personal, and did not know that his companion appropriated his remarks.

'"Repent and believe," is the first gospel command; then, it seems to me, comes "restore,"' he said slowly.

'I don't understand how people disbelieve. I never did in my life,' returned the General quickly. 'I always say you must have faith, you know.'

'And works,' added Mr. Tenderton meekly.

'How cold it is for May! Just stir the fire. What can have become of Septimus? If I were to have an attack now! What is the good of paying him hundreds if he neglects me in this way? Come into the library, Vicar.'

They went, and established themselves in easy-chairs. The General, as by some incomprehensible fascination, again took up the text.

'Who is that girl who lives with the Oreburns? They say she was a gipsy child, don't they?'

'They say everything. I hear she is now on a visit to her grandmother, a French Marquise. I think Sir Gilbert told me so himself.'

'Don't believe him—he tells all sorts of lies. He prejudiced his daughter—yes, his own daughter—against a person she was attached to—as I was saying, attached to, Vicar—I have every reason to know it—until she, the most charming girl in the world, was so blinded that she entirely changed, you know.'

'Are *you* not a little prejudiced against Sir Gilbert, General? Forgive my question, but parochial strife cuts me keenly. I wish I might act as mediator.'

'You had better keep to your pulpit as parson! Will you ring the bell? It is time for my mixture. Stalker, why haven't you brought my medicine? What's the good of people who don't attend to orders or hours?'

'Only a quarter to nine, sir—medicine at nine—one-sixth every four hours,' said Stalker, who came at the summons.

'Has Dr. Hope arrived?'

'No, sir. He must have lost the train. Last train 7.55.'

'I don't believe it. He never lost a train in his life.'

The General grew much excited, and was only calmed by Mr. Tenderton's proposal to remain until the doctor arrived. It was finally settled that he should sleep at the Manor, and a messenger was despatched to the Vicarage to inform his wife.

'You will read prayers, Vicar?' said the General, when ten o'clock struck, and the portly butler held the door open for the easier progress from library to dining-room.

They found the 'twenty servants' lining one side of the large room.

The General proceeded to the other, Mr. Tenderton to the table, on which Prayer-Book and Bible were outspread. Having read a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, the Vicar read the prayer prepared, and ended by a short extemporaneous petition for the assembled household and the parish. He made no personal allusion, but, when the General rose feebly from his knees, his countenance looked disturbed. He stood, however, to watch the servants file out with bow and curtsey, then proposed to go to bed, giving orders that some one should sit up for Dr. Hope.

In the middle of the night Mr. Tenderton was aroused by the valet. General Arlington was ill, and wanted to see him. Failing the corporeal, he desired the spiritual physician. The Vicar was greeted by complaints.

'I am very ill, and Septimus is not here. I will dismiss him—disinherit him—have no more to say to him. It is too bad—too bad!'

'He will be here early in the morning, and I will stop till he comes,' said Mr. Tenderton soothingly.

'Better take these drops, sir,' broke in Stalker, a tall, lean, sedate man, who stood, bottle in hand, on one side the bed, while Mr. Tenderton occupied the other. 'Dr. Hope ordered them.'

'Would *you* take them, Vicar? I am in a critical state, and a false step might be fatal, you know. I assure you I am alarmingly ill, and have not slept a wink all night,' said the General excitedly.

'Certainly *I* should take them,' answered the Vicar decidedly.

The drops were swallowed.

'Go into the dressing-room, Stalker—and, mind, don't sleep. Send for old Mant if I am worse. You will sit with me, Tenderton?'

The Vicar assented, and Stalker was soon asleep.

'I am not dying, only nervous, you know,' remarked the General. 'I am glad you are here; but if you hadn't come, Septimus would not have left. I, who have loaded him with benefits!'

'Depend upon it, he has lost the train,' said the Vicar cheerfully.

'He had no right to lose the train. When one adopts a fellow and makes him one's heir, he ought never to leave one. But I may marry yet, and alter my will. What was it you said about that French girl?'

'She is wonderfully attractive, but a little too young for you, General,' said Mr. Tenderton, knowing his patient's weakness for youth and beauty.

'I don't see that; but I wasn't thinking of marrying her. I want to have an interview with her, and I was thinking you might bring it about, you know. What was it you said about the rich man and your glebe? and repentance and reparation, and all that? My brother George was a scapegrace, you know, but my father was a little hard upon him, perhaps.'

'We are all hard upon our scapegraces. But what of Mademoiselle?

'I have reasons for wishing to see her; but Septimus mustn't know. If you could arrange to bring her, just as if she was taking a drive with you, you know, and you stopped on your road to inquire for me, I would send Septimus away for the day. But you will promise not to tell him?'

The General looked excited.

'Miss Fay is in France, and may not return for some time,' said Mr. Tenderton.

'She must return. Write to her and tell her I say so. Confide in Miss Oreburn, who has the sense of Solomon, or would have, if her father did not tyrannise over her. Curse him!'

'"Bless, and curse not,"' whispered the Vicar. '"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."'

'Preach to him, the satirical, proud, lazy fool, not to me who have the best of it—ay, the best of it. But bring the girl to me, as if by chance, and don't let Septimus know. Mind, I shall depend upon you.'

'But I must ask Sir Gilbert's permission.'

'I have a right to demand her, sir, and, by heaven, I will, if I choose!' exclaimed the General, sitting up and clenching his fist.

'I will do my best,' returned Mr. Tenderton meekly, seeing that General Arlington was beside himself. 'We will settle the plan to-morrow. Shall I read to you?'

'Thank you—yes. There are three volumes of sensational trash in the drawing-room. Stalker!'

'I will read the psalms for the day, if you don't mind. I seldom read a novel, except perhaps Scott or Miss Austen.'

'Antiquated prejudice! but as you like.'

The General settled himself again, and the Vicar began to read. He was in the habit of taking refuge in those portions of Scripture appointed for the day by the Church, when his listener was doubting or suspicious. He was chary of seeming personally pointed; so the Psalms were sure to speak for him. It was the twenty-sixth day of the month, and he read the Evening Prayer slowly and impressively. When he reached the last verse, however, he was disappointed in the effect he had produced, for General Arlington only said dreamily,—

'Don't forget the little French girl, and on no account tell Septimus,' and fell asleep.

CHAPTER LIV.

STILL IN DOUBT.

ELINOR is writing to Fay. Mr. Tenderton has been to the cottage, has made his communication, and departed. Elinor has confided its purport to her father, who has gone in search of Maxwell, now become a sort of Butterfield-of-refuge in difficulty. They arrive together; before Elinor has covered her first page, Maxwell greets her, as usual, distantly, and they begin to discuss Fay. They have already met to talk over letters from her and Gilbert, descriptive of their first interview with the Marquise, and others have since arrived, which Elinor produces from her portfolio.

'Your *fiancée* may be a great heiress after all,' said Sir Gilbert. 'We have the Marquise amiable—and her dependants would tell you *that* was as welcome as fresh fish in Lent; and we have the General aroused to his interests—and his dependants would tell you that he never slept over them. You are a lucky fellow. Not that I imagine you mercenary.'

Maxwell smiled and glanced at Elinor, whose eyes were on her desk. He not unnaturally thought that she, at least, would exonerate him from mercenary motives towards Fay, not knowing—as how should he !—that she believed him in love with her. As regarded himself, he had long ago let Law swallow up Love. Still he did not conceal his admiration of Fay. It was very perplexing, as such things are.

'Just hear what she says of her grandmother,' resumed Sir Gilbert, taking up Fay's letter, and running his eyes over it, until he found the part he sought. Then he read aloud : " You already know *Madame la Grand'mère*, and may imagine how awfully *gênée* I am in her presence. I use the word "awfully," because Gilbert dislikes it. *Entre nous*, I think I like the wicked uncle best ; but then I like all English, and abjure the French. She is *dévote*, and sits erect and pious, striving to convert me to the Catholic religion. But I say we are all Protestant, and I despise perversion. I ask her for money to pay off the mortgages, and she tells me she has not enough for her alms and offices. I say I would sell Château Marimon to release my benefactors ; and she replies, shrugging her shoulders and taking snuff, that she has other grandchildren. I sneeze violently and pull the lap-dog's tail. She is not yet well, and I try to make myself useful ; but she prefers the antiquated *femme de chambre* in Breton costume. The domestiques are ancient as *la grand'mère*. Behold a sketch of them as they wait at table, also of *la grand'mère en grande tenue*, Gilbert making the agreeable to her, and frowning at me ; and the incorrigible Fay, with eyes like Red Riding Hood's wolf, and a mouth like the wide-mouthed, waddling frog, nodding at him.'

'Look at the sketch, it is so clever,' said Elinor, and Maxwell laughed heartily as he glanced at it.

'Might I hear the rest?' he asked, and Sir Gilbert resumed.

'Still *la grand'mère* thinks me handsome, and has already provided me with jewels and costumes for my introduction to an uncle and some cousins, invited to a banquet in my honour. She has disembarrassed herself of that conscientious weight concerning my mother's marriage, received absolution, and announced me as her beloved and charming grand-daughter. Still Gilbert persists in leaving us, in order to search the abominable registers, which cannot surely be necessary under present propitious skies. *Ma foi*, the French have the advantage over us in that particular. How blue they are at this moment ! And when he is here, he is infinitely more polite to the Marquise than to me, and she is devoted to him. Why does he call me a French coquette, when I am wholly English? He says, because I seek to attract the gentlemen that come here ; and they are not many. Indeed, I make no exertions. But Gilbert is supremely arrogant, and I confess that I torment him. Pardon, Elinor ; he has been much spoilt, and I desire a triumph over him. He is quite different from my *fiancé*, who does not interfere with me. Make him my affectionate compliments, and tell him I die to see him again. Indeed I die to see you all; but *la grand'mère* detains me while Gilbert wanders through the churches, and I call him the good Catholic priest. You are all in my heart, which loves you with a great, huge love; and Saar Gilbert—you see I even write it Saar—is dearer, handsomer, more piquant, more lovable than all the Frenchmen in the world. I am no longer as Mary Stuart, pining for France; but as Fay, longing for fair sweet England, and her friends and compatriots. Oh, to be by the river, gathering cowslips, in the orchard with the apple-blossoms! We shall be home when the roses and honeysuckles bloom. Here we are enclosed with woods and woods of chestnut. All my love is at the cottage, Elinor, *ma mie.* Tell Sir Gilbert and Aimée so, at least, *almost* all. Kiss Villy Mongshar for me. I hope he has not been at "his maraudings again," and that the adorable Stokes reigns. Say something kind to every one, even to Arbiter. *La grand'mère* sends her *salutations empressées*, and talks much of my "*aimables bienfaiteurs*," but makes no effort to return to them their "inestimable benefits." *Adieu*, *chéris*. *Adieu*, *mes anges.*—Your loving, devoted, grateful Fay.'

'She is certainly charming,' said Sir Gilbert, laying down the letter. 'You can read my son's, and you will see that he has traced her parents, but cannot discover where they were married.'

Maxwell read Gilbert's letter, short and to the purpose, as usual.

'Everything seems in train, if we could find the certificate,' he said. 'Meanwhile, she should see the General; but I fear that she would refuse to come to him.'

'So do I,' rejoined Sir Gilbert, 'and my son would not possess influence enough to induce her.'

'I am not so sure of that,' remarked Maxwell dryly.

'You are the all-powerful, the open sesame,' said Sir Gilbert. 'I wish you could run over and bring her back, while my son continues his researches. Elinor could write and prepare her.'

'My dear Sir Gilbert, you forget your own affairs. The General and his advisers are chafing at your son's absence, and urging me to recall him.'

'If you could only fetch him and Fay! What time and fatigue would be spared!' emphasised Sir Gilbert, looking listlessly out of the window.

'Mr. Maxwell's own business must be considered, dear father,' suggested Elinor.

'I looked on him as ubiquitous. Just talk it over while I entertain Mr. Pouncefort, who is at this moment within the charmed circle of our gravel,' said Sir Gilbert, leaving Maxwell and Elinor 'to talk over' Fay. But they are silent awhile, as if aware that Fay is a difficult, if not actually disagreeable subject. However, Elinor, overcoming some hidden feeling, begins it.

'Since Fay *must* come, would it be possible for you to—to advise her?' she asks. 'Gilbert has not patience, and might even throw his weight the other way. He is as proud as she.'

'Would *you* wish me to go to France, Miss Oreburn? If I thought I could lessen your responsibilities, or relieve you even of a letter, I would go,' he replies.

A quick, grateful glance rewards him, succeeded by a nervous resumption of the abandoned pen.

'Your time is so valuable,' she says.

'Still it would be at your service,' he replies, watching the hand that moves the pen, as if in some imaginary correspondence.

'At mine? At Fay's, you mean!' she exclaims, glancing up involuntarily.

'As you please,' he says coldly. 'But you at least should understand me better.'

Their eyes meet for a moment, and her pale face flushes.

'I understand how kind you have been to us all, and how interested in—in Fay,' she blurts out, and hesitates.

'Very!' he replies dryly. 'That fact is continually presented to me by my friends and acquaintances, as well as by the innocent child herself; but I had hoped *you* would have spared me the repetition. It is, I suppose, a due punishment for my blind presumption years ago.'

'Oh, Mr. Maxwell,' exclaims Elinor, 'if you only knew! But indeed, indeed I am grateful.'

'For what?' he cries bitterly. 'I hate the word gratitude. It is a mere ready substitute for all that a man most longs for, and he who desires it deserves to lose it. When I risked my all, as a speculator who hazards on chance, and lost, I did not demand the poor exchange of gratitude.'

Again their eyes meet; his are beaming with some strange emotion—hers troubled and questioning.

'What can I say more?' she asks. 'We owe you so much, and repay you so ill.'

Her voice trembles.

'Say nothing,' he replies. 'The words you once spoke to me sufficed for a lifetime. I ventured without a compass, and was wrecked. Doubtless some happier man gathered the gold I sought. I will not have the dross. Gratitude is dross.'

'If I understand you aright,' says Elinor, gathering courage beneath his looks and manner, so excited, yet so kind, 'I should say that no one ever has had, or can have, the gold you seem to mean.'

'What I have lost no other man has won?' he cries hastily.

'No other,' she replies, shading her face with her hand.

'Oh, Miss Oreburn, why are you so fair, and yet so cold?—so unselfish, and yet so selfish? To keep what so many pine for, and not even open a loophole of your feelings—to *have* no feelings, indeed!'

He thinks he sees a tear ooze through the long white fingers.

'If only I knew why you are so cold and distant,' he continues, 'I might be better satisfied with my fate. But while I see you as you are, my mind will not rest. I ought never to have ventured into your presence again.'

'What could we have done without you?' she asks simply, removing her hand from her face. 'I may not speak of gratitude, but I may *feel* it, even though you say I have no feeling. Since the day you allude to, I have grown older, if not wiser, and can now ask you to be my friend, which then I could not. Everything has changed, except my position.'

'Do you mean that you still adhere to what you told me then?' he asks excitedly.

'I must. I have no alternative. But you—you have Fay!'

'You persist in misunderstanding me; but of what use to explain or asseverate, when you are unchanged and unchangeable? I once thought General Arlington influenced you—but how?'

'He did, and does,' says Elinor, again covering her face.

Maxwell starts up and approaches her in his excitement.

'He who has been your father's ruin?' he exclaims.

'And mine,' she says calmly, her face paling.

He does not understand her—how can he? He sees that she is agitated, and wonders if she can really care for him who has been her father's enemy. The idea is absurd. He hazards one more question.

'Would it be different if General Arlington were dead?'

'It might; but I should still have my father and Aimée.'

'You have at least forgiven me my presumption?' he says, after a pause, resuming his seat, and drawing it nearer hers.

'I have to ask, not grant forgiveness,' she rejoins, again looking at him, and half holding out her hand.

He does not see the partial advance, but, recovering his distant manner, says pointedly,—

'Then we are *friends*, Miss Oreburn; that is something. I have somehow lost all my friends of late.'

'You have gained my father, and—my brother—and'— She hesitates.

'Let me believe I have gained you. Sir Gilbert and you suffice.

Two friends fill up a life—I want no more. Use me when and how you will. Am I to go after Fay?'

The sudden transition rouses Elinor, whose temporary emotion calms. But there is a tear in the grey eyes, a droop in the proud head.

'As you like; but if we are friends, let me ask, as a first request, that you act on your own responsibility. I cannot interfere between you and her.'

And this was how they talked about Fay. When Sir Gilbert rejoined them, he found matters where he had left them.

CHAPTER LV.

A QUARREL AT CHÂTEAU MARIMON.

GILBERT and Fay were alone together. The Marquise was not well, and kept her room. Gilbert had but just returned from his fruitless search after the marriage certificate, and had been recounting his wanderings, while Fay made believe to work at some embroidery belonging to her grandmother. They were in a small, quaint room, with a large oriel window.

'We have been here a month already, and I am wearied to death,' cried Fay. 'When shall we return home?'

'I shall not go until I have succeeded. I never gave up anything I was determined to gain,' rejoined Gilbert. 'And as regards you, the Marquise declares she cannot part with you.'

'It is useless that she declares it—for I go. I will not live in this *triste* place with her who forsook my mother, rejected my father, and only receives me because she thinks to make a *pénitence* before she dies. Saar Gilbert promised that I should return, and if you decline to accompany me, I go alone.'

'Impossible, Fay. Now I have you to myself, you must wait my pleasure; and Madame la Marquise presses me to remain.'

'Yes, you are insufferably polite to her. One would think you were her lover.'

'Perhaps I am. She is grand, and has the gift of conversation.'

'Nevertheless, it is time that you return to Saar Gilbert and Aimée, and that I accompany you, otherwise I go alone.'

Fay rose majestic, and walked towards the window.

'Although you cannot care for my escort, you can scarcely go alone. Indeed, judging from your mirth at dinner yesterday, your flirtation with your new cousin and that puppy of a Comte, and your sarcastic hits at me, I should think you would rather be quit of me. But you might be civil while we are together.'

'Why do you call me flirt and coquette, Mr. Oreburn, and say that I seek to attract the butterflies, as the rose does? I do not like such language. And I see not that you are immaculate. Mademoiselle, *ma belle cousine*, with the dress *a la mode*, *coiffée* like an ancient picture, jewelled as the sisters of Cinderella, and crimsoned like a peony, appeared not indifferent to your politeness.'

'She resembled you, only her crimson was artistic, yours natural. Be assured, however, that yours grew quite as radiant beneath the heaven of French compliment. Still, of two coquettes, one prefers the least artificial. I liked you best.'

'You are condescendingly complimentary, Monsieur. It matters not to me whom you prefer.'

'But it may matter to *me* whom *you* prefer; and your old English *adorato* is at least superior to these new French ones.'

'Ah, you mean Monsieur Villy. I agree with you totally. I am glad you like him. I loved him from the first moment that I saw him.'

'Your love seems easily won, Mademoiselle. You love him still?'

'Of course I do.'

'Your affection is certainly patent to all, though scarcely maidenly.'

'Why not? He is old, steady, grave, and considers me still a child. But I see not in what this concerns you. Saar Gilbert has never lectured me during his whole protectorate—that is not quite the word—as you have since our brief acquaintance.'

'Brief! I have known and pictured you ever since you came to the Court. Still the real differs from the ideal.'

'You fancied me better—more *gentille*. I also imagined you more amiable, and—one must be truthful—less good-looking.'

'Oh, Fay, it would be better for my peace if I had found you different.'

'I grieve that I do not please you. Yet you were so kind when we met, and my first impressions were infinitely agreeable. You rescued me gently, generously, as—as Monsieur Villy.'

'Monsieur Villy again! Excuse me, but I am tired of him.'

'You liked him just now.'

'I detest his name. Pray return to the necessities and realities of life.'

'Necessities! We are not in the backwoods, where you say you first catch your hare, then cook it; nor at the cottage, where Elinor declares herself "cumbered about much serving;" but in Château Marimon, where we have everything. You hate the sweet word Villy; I hate the odious word Money. Why cannot those who want it procure it?'

'You ask a great social, political, and philosophical question, which I cannot solve. I wish I had it, then I should not return to America.'

Gilbert looked at Fay and sighed. The jealous green suddenly left his eyes, and the frank, true blue returned to them.

'You shall not go to America. You want the hateful pelf. We will beg, borrow, steal it. I remember that I have some already laid aside for the occasion. I fetch it; wait here till I return. You are cross, but you will not refuse it.'

She vanished, and left Gilbert to the following reflections:

'I am cross—obstinately, stupidly, jealously cross. What is it to a poor emigrant like me if she still loves her *fiancé*—her Villy—best? Maundering, detestable words! They set my teeth on edge; and when they fall like pearls from her lips, I wish them the unclean beasts of the fairy tale. Still I let myself be entangled in her net, and if I strive to free myself, get more and more inextricably entwined. No kindly mouse to nibble a hole for the netted lion. What business have I to fall in love with a penniless, nameless girl, who doesn't care a jot for me? I, who have fought fate as bravely as a soldier his enemy, succumb to a mere child! I will leave her with the Marquise, and get back to England at once; then to America as soon as affairs are ended. Let Maxwell come and fetch her, and find the certificate that he waits for, and marry her if he will. Marry her!—by heaven, he shall not! Here she comes, with her stars of eyes, her red, laughter-loving lips, her coquettish bit of crimson, her French, dancing feet, and her tormenting, entrancing manners. What a fool I am!'

Gilbert described her well, as she returned, photograph-case in hand, and joined him in the great oriel.

'Look at my father. He is so handsome to-day. I think he likes you, Gilbert, for he smiles,' she said, placing the open case on the window-sill.

'I wish *you* liked me, Fay,' replied Gilbert, thus following out his good resolutions. 'Do you remember when you gave Aimée back to us? How tender and sweet you seemed!'

'It was not I, but God, who returned her spirit in answer to our prayers,' she replied reverently.

'You and Aimée appeared two angels to me then,' he said excitedly.

'Aimée of light, I of darkness,' she rejoined, flushing like the dawn, and bending over her photograph.

'Yet you seemed to care for me?'

'Of course I did.'

She had used those words when he asked her if she loved his rival. He watched her as she leant her hot face over her father's picture, and saw her hair and ribbons moved by the breeze from the open casement. A sunbeam glanced through the surrounding chestnut trees and flickered about her; while the perfume of the flowers from beneath the window crept in on the wind's indolent wing. He wished he were the breeze, the beam, the perfume. But he roused himself from the contemplation of this charming picture, and said hastily,—

'What of the photograph, Fay?'

'It contains my fortune,' she replied, half shyly, half playfully, turning her gleaming eyes and crimsoned face towards him.

It will be remembered that she had hidden Mr. Moneypenny's present in the velvet cushion of the case, where it had remained ever since, forgotten. She now tried to extricate it, but it was pushed so low that she feared to tear the velvet. Gilbert took a many-bladed knife from his pocket, and, opening a hook, begged to be allowed to try. She held the case while he inserted the instrument. He drew out the note, and with it some other paper, yellow and torn.

'You detach the lining. We must replace this,' said Fay.

They were about to do so, when Gilbert perceived that the supposed lining contained writing, and saw the word 'Arlington.'

'Open it before you put it back,' he exclaimed hastily.

Fay spread out the strip of discoloured, crumpled paper, and Gilbert, with his finger once more on her shoulder, glanced at it.

'It is!—it must be!' he cried vehemently.

'What?' asked Fay, amazed.

'The marriage certificate!' he replied.

Fay turned pale, red, pale again, looked at him, then at the invaluable strip of paper. Assuredly the small, crumpled, half-effaced writing certified to the marriage of her parents—of George Arlington to Félicité Gabrielle de Quebelle de Marimon. Restraint was over, and in the sudden joy they were hand in hand.

'Righted! Thank God!' cried Gilbert; while Fay but half understood his words. 'But where did it take place? Where is Saint Bévier le Coq?'

A knock at the door interrupted them. He stuffed the paper and note into his pocket, shut the case, and said '*Entrez.*'

'*Des lettres pour Monsieur et pour Mademoiselle,*' said a servant, bringing in letters.

'From Elinor to me, and Saar Gilbert to you,' said Fay, taking them.

She tore her envelope abstractedly, her eyes and mind still on the certificate, Gilbert watching her.

'Listen, Gilbert. Wonder succeeds wonder. I have the most marvellous news. Elinor writes that General Arlington is dangerously ill, and has expressed a wish to see me. What can he want with me? Probably to reproach me for my ill conduct towards him; or to crave my father's forgiveness through me, his child; or to acknowledge himself my uncle. I must go at once, lest he die.'

She rose from her low seat in the window, and seemed about to hurry away.

'Stop—read the remainder of the letter,' said Gilbert, detaining her.

'Ah, I ever forget the future in the present,' she sighed, and obeyed.

Her face underwent many changes as she read on; at last she grew crimson, as she exclaimed, hesitating,—

'Elinor writes coldly, and—and—almost unkindly. I feel it; but she tells me— Read it yourself, Gilbert; it seems so strange and unnecessary.'

Gilbert took the letter, and Fay watched him in her turn. A heavy frown succeeded the kindly interest of his face.

'Why should they send Monsieur Villy?' she inquired doubtfully.

'I suppose you know best,' replied Gilbert coldly, returning the letter and glancing at his own.

'How should I know? Elinor says Saar Gilbert will explain.'

'He does explain. He seems to think Mr. Maxwell's influence would turn the scale, were your mind balancing in a direction counter to what seems important to your interests.'

'Pray do not talk so majestically. It does not suit you. They think I should return to make the peace with my wicked—I mean—my—I mean *that man*, before he dies. I agree with them; but I could go without Monsieur Villy, though I shall rejoice to see him, and introduce him to *Madame la Grand'mère*. I have already spoken of him, and she dies to make his acquaintance.'

'Really! It is fortunate that you will be here to introduce him. I do not think the Marquise will allow you to return. But that is no concern of mine. You will now have a sufficient and agreeable escort, and I can pursue my wanderings alone.'

'At your good pleasure, sir. For me, I go; no matter how or with whom, but no Marquise shall hinder me to make the peace with the dying. I already fear lest I am too late. *Bon Dieu!* how they mistake me! No one understands me but Monsieur Villy; not even Saar Gilbert. Can they believe that I should hesitate to obey the summons of the dying?'

'He is not dying; he merely wishes to see you; and worldly hopes and interests have influenced even my father. They will also spur on your *fiancé*. He will not be indifferent to a titled grandmother and a rich uncle, probably; though he did not seem in a hurry to escort you when these relatives were under a cloud.'

Gilbert stood opposite Fay, flushed and angry. She replied indignantly, waving her hands,—

'My *fiancé* is not mercenary, sir. Did he not leave London at the call of his friend, and has he not toiled as the ants in Saar Gilbert's service? He has angered his uncle on *our* account, has'—

'Say *your* account, Fay,' interrupted Gilbert bitterly.

'*Ma foi*, I care not whose; but he is just, and you are unjust. I hate the injustice. That is why I hated the General, and should hate him still, were he not dying. But now I go to receive his forgiveness, and to demand the *maudits mortgages* for Saar Gilbert. I have sworn on this photograph that he shall yet have his own, and you yours, sir, though you detest and despise me. I have sworn that the Court shall never depart from the Oreburn while Félicité Gabrielle de'—a pause—'de Marimon lives to prevent it, and my oath shall yet be accomplished.'

She took up the photograph-case, and was sweeping past Gilbert.

'Stay! take these also!' he said authoritatively, presenting the certificate and bank-note.

She turned, hesitated, looked at Gilbert's agitated face, and paused a moment.

'No; I will not take them!' she said. 'I care not for them. Use them as you will. You have helped to secure them, and have been, as your family, my benefactor. I thank you from my heart; but you alone have reproved me unjustly, and maligned my first, my kindest, my most constant friend. I go to inform the Marquise of these events, and to make preparations for his arrival and my departure.

Tears swelled in her indignant eyes; but Gilbert was too wrathfu to be softened by them. The proposed arrival of Maxwell had raised the demon, and he was not to be exorcised at a word. He followed Fay to the door, the papers in his hand, and the words 'Take them' on his lips; but she flung it open, and passed out. He saw her mount the ancient staircase like a rapid ghost, and disappear on the landing. He stood a moment, gazing on the spot where she had been, then, closing the door, began to pace the room.

'Let them return together, if they will. What can it matter to me?' he muttered. 'I will find out this Bévier le Coq, as I said I would, then sign the deeds, and be once more free! I wish I had never returned to sell my inheritance for less than Jacob's mess of pottage, and my soul for a glance. But I will conquer this unrequited love, that makes me little better than a madman! I will dig and delve it out of my nature, and leave her to her *fiancé*. Yet I would do for her what he would not—the cold, calculating pettifogger.'

While he was thus soliloquising, Fay was engaged in animated discourse with her grandmother. She had told her of her summons, and the probable arrival of Maxwell, which even she, in her excitement, deemed imprudent; and had expressed her resolution to 'obey the call of duty,' as she phrased it. The Marquise had heard impatiently, with many vain attempts at interruption; and when Fay at last ceased, she poured forth her checked stream of talk, for, like all Frenchwomen, she was an animated conversationalist. She was in bed, but ready for company; *coiffée* with lace of fabulous value, and surrounded by all the elegancies of toilette and gilded furniture. She sat upright, while Fay placed herself on a low seat opposite her, with her back to a cheval-glass. It was now her turn to listen, which she did restlessly and impatiently, and each excited movement was reflected in the glass.

'Impossible that you go! I have but just recovered you, and will not separate myself from you while I live. Mr. Oreburn may remain also—he is a good and respectable *parti*, and speaks French like a native. We can arrange all that. Who is this gentleman who arrives? An advocate, you say—not noble, not aristocratic—the man of affairs of Sir Gilbert. We will send him back at once, and explain that we desire no favours from this General that we hate—you and I. Let him die! The Arlingtons are detestable, and a *canaille* better out of the world than in it. *Mon Dieu!* what have we to do with them? We wash our hands of them; but the Oreboorn—*non!* They are of the ancient *régime*, and, were they Catholic, were perfect; but that will come. I see already the indications in the young man, who will return with you to the faith when you are married.'

'*De grâce*, Madame!' broke in Fay, unable longer to restrain herself, and covering her crimson face with her hands.

'*Chut, ma petite!* Bring him here—I would consult him concerning this gentleman who comes, and commission him to dismiss him politely. A child like you, although endowed with the talent of the De Marimons, cannot manage the affairs like a politician. Go, go—quick! Let him do me the favour of visiting me here. I am prepared to receive him. Return also yourself.'

The Marquise glanced into the cheval glass, which reflected her as well as Fay, and waved her hands towards the door. Fay rose, and said impetuously as she left the room,—

'It is useless that you consult, but I go. I shall return home with my *fiancé*.'

'*Fiancé!*—what does she mean?' shrieked the Marquise. But Fay was gone, and had encountered Gilbert in the hall.

'Madame la Marquise desires the honour of a consultation with Monsieur le Chevalier de Oreboorn,' she said, her own naïve vivacity returning with the novel situation. 'She considers you a politician and a Catholic, and'—

Fay suddenly interrupted herself, for she remembered her grandmother's matrimonial plans. Again she coloured crimson, and, pointing to the staircase, rushed past Gilbert, past a servant, and out through the great entrance into the Court. While Gilbert went to the Marquise with the words, 'Where is Bévier le Coq?' on his lips, Fay heard a familiar voice exclaim, 'Ah, there she is! Have you had the letters that I sent up to announce my arrival?' turned, and saw Maxwell.

* * *

CHAPTER LVI.

WAS IT TOO LATE?

DR. HOPE had some difficulty to convince General Arlington that he had lost the train, owing to missing Mr. Customs, on the night when Mr. Tenderton slept at the Manor. Although he believed that a will had been made in his favour, he was not quite satisfied with the aspect of affairs. The General seemed better pleased with Mr. Tenderton's company than with his, and grew restless and irritable if that good pastor did not visit him daily; he even consented to his doctor's frequent absences, provided he were left with his clergyman. Dr. Hope did not altogether like this; still he was thankful for release from the incessant worry of his fractious, irritable patient, knowing that he would not alter his will in the Vicar's favour. When they were together, the General spoke of no one but 'that young Oreburn,' and the length of his absence. This was natural and satisfactory, as the business could not be finally settled till his return; but he harped upon the subject so persistently that the doctor began to fear he was going out of his mind on one idea.

In truth, General Arlington was very ill, and, although he went through his days much as usual, there was an undoubted change in him. Mr. Tenderton saw this, and, acting on the General's persistent desire to see 'that little French girl,' went again to Elinor, to urge Fay's return. His second visit had settled the matter, and resulted in the departure of Maxwell, bearing the letters which would otherwise have gone through the post.

'What on earth could make them send Maxwell, when that young Oreburn was there already?' asked the General of the Vicar.

'They say that he is in love with the child,' was the reply.

'What else do they say?'

'That she is the grand-daughter of a French Marchioness; but this is only report, for Sir Gilbert and his family are wise enough to keep their own counsel.'

'One would think, to hear you talk, that those people were perfect.'

As near as can be, General, in this imperfect sphere.'

I detest them all. When can the French girl be back?'

'They do not know yet whether she will come at all; indeed, they seem to fear she may choose to remain in France.'

This was the style of conversation that passed daily during Mr. Tenderton's visits, and General Arlington grew more and more difficult to manage.

One morning he said to Dr. Hope,—

'Will you go and tell Customs that they must bring the transfer deeds here at once, ready against young Oreburn's return? I asked the Vicar to luncheon, so you need not hurry back. The business will never be settled. You had better go by the next train. Leave directions with Stalker about my medicine, and return to dinner. Are you sure my pulse is stronger? Just look at my tongue before you go.'

The General was feeling his pulse while the doctor was carefully examining the tongue.

'All right—progressing favourably,' was the fiat; and Dr. Hope made his escape.

As soon as he was gone, General Arlington took from his pocket a note he had received that morning from Mr. Tenderton, and read it.

'"He thinks she may arrive to-night"—that was last evening; "he will bring her as soon as he can, if they will let him." Pshaw! they must let him. "Sir Gilbert is still uncertain if she will come or not." The consummate fool! Any one else would be able to govern his family. And so I am still in doubt, and Septimus may be absent all day to no purpose. But anyhow the Vicar will come. I wonder why he is for ever poking sermons at me? If it hadn't been for his glebe and granaries, *that girl* wouldn't have haunted me day and night; and I shouldn't have seen George's ghost, and the old Sir Gilbert's, and— I wish to heavens Tenderton would come! Stalker! Hallett, send Stalker to me.'

The General rang and fumed until his valet appeared.

'Just keep in the way, Stalker; and if Mr. Tenderton should bring a lady,—Mrs. Tenderton, or—or—a friend,—show her in here, if I choose to see her. I don't want the servants to gossip about ladies, and that sort of thing, you know; it excites my nerves, you know. Say she is merely driving with the Vicar—you understand? Confound you, man, you look as stolid as pig-iron!'

'Yes, sir—I understand,' said Stalker solemnly. 'I will watch, and answer the door myself, so that not even Dr. Hope shall know.'

'Give me your arm, Stalker; I am all of a tremble. I will go into the drawing-room, for it is very hot here. A broiling June always makes me weak.'

The General, leaning on Stalker, looks very feeble, and, when he reaches the drawing-room, insists on his draught. Having taken it, he dismisses his valet and walks languidly about the room, talking to himself—a dangerous habit into which he, like most lonely people, has fallen. He finally takes a little white muff from a chiffonier, and lays it on an ottoman; then walks into his conservatory and gathers a blush-rose, which he places near the muff. He wonders at his own inconsistency; but he prepares an imaginary reception for Fay.

'She left in December, she returns in June,' he says, with a sudden pain, which impels him to put his hand to his side and sink into an easy-chair near the ottoman.

He takes up a book and tries to read. In vain. At last he hears the distant sound of wheels, and recovers his self-possession and natural proclivities. He looks in the splendid and flattering glass that adorns his mantelpiece, and arranges his moustache. The hall bell rings, and Mr. Tenderton enters, unannounced and alone.

'She has not arrived!' exclaims the General, with a gasp.

'Do not excite yourself; she--I'— begins Mr. Tenderton, going up quietly to him.

'Speak out. What are you afraid of?' fiercely.

'She is here.'

'Bring her in--and then—if you don't mind--leave us,' he stammers.

Mr. Tenderton disappears, and then returns, followed by Fay.

Yes, she has carried her point, and come. In spite of the Marquise's remonstrances, in spite of Gilbert's jealousy, she is here, handsome, wilful, impetuous, fascinating as ever. She enters on tiptoe, her fingers on her lips, daintily attired in a French costume, surmounted by a Watteau hat, with a wreath of crimson rosebuds—muse of silence--goddess of fashion.

As Mr. Tenderton withdraws, she advances towards the General, curtseys stiffly, and stands erect before him. She expected to see a dying man, instead of the old beau, still well dressed, perfumed, and pomaded. He rises, bows, and is much less self-possessed than she.

'You are indisposed, sir—pray do not stand. You sent for me—I come,' she begins.

'You will be seated, Mademoiselle?' he hazards doubtfully, remembering their former meeting, and pointing to the ottoman.

'Ha! here is my muff that I left in the winter, and such a lovely rose!' she exclaims ecstatically, sitting down by them. 'You have been kind to preserve my muff, and prepare the flower.'

The General is reassured, and looks at her. He has never seen any one so handsome. She returns his glance, and her black eyes seem to pierce into his heart.

'Thank you for coming. I—I wished to see you, because'--he stammers.

'I understand, sir,' she supplies, 'because you are ill, and wish to make the peace before you die. It is so, is it not?'

'Not at all—not at all. I am not dying. Who could have said so?' he replies hastily.

'Then I am misinformed, and am glad. But you are ill, and have requested my presence. I come on your account from France, where

I have been visiting my grandmother, and hasten to you at once. I have experienced much trouble of mind lest you should die before I arrived, and have resolved to ask your pardon for my offences towards you. I do so quickly, lest my good mind should change, and the evil return ; for I am ever uncertain of temper, though I trust I improve. When I saw you first, I had been taught no religion, and I hated you. Good Mr. Tenderton, Saar Gilbert Oreburn, and his daughters have endeavoured to instruct me better, and to teach me to "love my neighbour as myself, and to bear no malice nor hatred in my heart." I confess that I refused to consider you as my neighbour, and hated you still, feeling impertinent and revengeful when we met. Of late my heart has softened ; and when I saw you last at the Court, you appeared so troubled that I pitied you. But when I fancied you were dying—you, my father's brother, without one word of forgiveness from him or me, it seemed so fearful, that I rested not, I slept not, until I came.'

Fay paused in her rapid speech and crossed her arms on her breast.

'This to me!' exclaimed the General, bewildered.

'Yes, sir. I ask your forgiveness for my evil words and devilish thoughts.'

She rose slowly, and knelt down before him.

'My forgiveness!' he said, astonished.

'Yes, sir. I desire to make the peace with you before you die.'

'Child, it is not you, but I. Can you forgive me?'

This in a hoarse, agitated voice.

'I forgive your trespasses, as I pray you to forgive mine, so that the great God may forgive us both,' she said solemnly.

General Arlington sat motionless, while something akin to remorse crept into his soul. The folded hands, downcast eyes, and kneeling figure recalled the impulsive petitioner of the winter. There was a short silence between them.

'Rise, I entreat you,' he said at last.

'Not until we have made the peace,' she whispered.

'You are impulsive, and alarm me,' he said. 'I did not expect this.'

'It was for this I came. You forgive me?'

'If you are my brother's child, it is I who should ask forgiveness,' he stammered.

With the doubt returned the natural Fay.

'If!' she exclaimed, starting up, and facing him. 'You know I am.'

'Hush! do not excite me. I did not mean to annoy you ; but I cannot take in things in a moment ; and my nerves are shattered you know. Indeed, I wish to clear up matters ; but pray sit down, child.'

Fay reseated herself. The half-dramatic reconciliation for which she had prepared herself was a failure, and she had some difficulty in restraining further impetuosity.

'Everything connected with me is clear as the daylight,' she said, looking the General in the face.

'I only wish to know the truth,' he rejoined nervously, just touching her dress, and returning her gaze with a look almost beseeching. 'You spoke of French relatives, and I hear of Marquises, and—and —as I was saying'—

'A title has the grand sound, as Saar Gilbert said,' supplied Fay, resisting a feeling of indignation. 'You would venture to acknowledge the descendant of a noble race, but not the doubtful Fay. Is it so?'

'No, no—not exactly ; but who was your mother?'

'The daughter of the Marquise de Marimon.'

'But how came she to marry my—your—I mean George?'

'She loved him, and left her home for him. What would you? When we love we sacrifice. I might have loved you, sir!'

The General groaned.

'Have this Marquise and her family acknowledged you?'

'Of course. They recognised the likeness of my mother.'

'What proofs—where are the proofs? I, too, would acknowledge you, could I give to the world the proofs.'

'We have the marriage certificate, and Mr. Oreburn is even now in search for the church in order to verify it. But I came not for the honour of being declared your niece, which I desire not, but to exchange a mutual pardon, and to entreat again for the release of my benefactors.'

'What do you mean? Don't speak to me of Gilbert Oreburn. I have nothing to do with him.'

'And I can have nothing to do with his enemy. Restore to him the Court, destroy the mortgages, cast off the burden from your conscience, and I am your niece. I would even try to love you.'

'Impossible! Don't name him. I asked for you to speak of my —of your father.'

The word arrested Fay—the General's manner softened her. She was again on her knees before him, her father's photograph in her hand.

'I bring him, that he may also make the peace,' she said, unclasping the case.

'One moment,' cried the General, laying his hand upon it. 'Was he very bitter against me?'

'He was never bitter, but always kind and forgiving. You remember that he wrote his forgiveness. Look at him, and he shall silently repeat it.'

She placed the open photograph in his hand.

'Thou wast ever handsome and smiling, is it not, *mon père?* And how my mother loved thee! She preserved the record of her marriage face to face with thee. See also my mother, sir.'

Fay drew forth her other photograph, and laid it on the General's knee. He glanced from dead husband to dead wife, then to the living child. His face was ghastly, for a sickly faintness was stealing over him.

'You forgive me?' he muttered.

'We all forgive you,' she replied.

'Kiss me—call me uncle,' he said, clasping her hands, and dropping the case as he leaned forwards.

'Uncle!' she said, and kissed him.

The General fainted. The strong had indeed grown weak. She rose from her knees and supported him a moment, then laid his head back on the chair, kissed him again, and ran for help, crying aloud in her terror,—

'Lord have mercy upon us! Forgive us, O God!'

Stalker was in the hall, and, seeing her white face, went into the room, while she summoned Mr. Tenderton. The valet administered a strong draught; Fay knelt down and chafed the cold thin hands; the Vicar prayed.

'Say he is not dead!' cried Fay.

'No, no, miss, he is not dead. I have seen him so before,' said Stalker. 'But you must have frightened him.'

The General revived slowly. When he recovered consciousness, he said,—

'Where is she? My niece? The little French girl?'

'I am here,' replied Fay, pressing the hands she held.

He smiled and looked round, muttering,—

'Don't send for Dr. Hope. I am better, and not dying. You need not be alarmed, my dear. Kiss me again.'

Fay threw her arms round him, and he encircled her feebly with his.

'Now we have all made the peace for ever,' she sobbed.

Stalker, believing him out of his mind, prepared brandy and water, and proposed his going to his room; but again embracing Fay, he whispered, 'Do not leave me,' and his 'ruling passion' returned with self-possession.

Fay, who was in an agony of distress, was suddenly relieved by seeing him put his hand to his head and feel for his *toupet*, while

Stalker whispered, 'All right, sir.' She, who was ready to laugh in any moment of anguish, when the ridiculous succeeded the sublime, smiled, and the General saw it. He smiled also, happily misapprehending her, and held out his hand. She took it.

'Mr. Tenderton—Stalker,' he began, in his usual half-querulous, half-commanding manner, 'I know I can trust you both, and that you will tell no one what I am about to say—especially not Dr. Hope. On no account breathe it to him—at present. This is my niece; my unfortunate brother George's daughter; grand-daughter of the Marquise de Marimon, you know. I intend to make this public when—when my nerves are stronger; but she will excuse me for a week or so, till she has that other certificate she mentioned. It must be all straight, you know—all straight. You will not mention this?'

'Certainly not, sir,' said the astonished Stalker, gazing on Fay, while the Vicar was silent with surprise.

'I wish to make a memorandum. Wheel the writing-table here, Stalker!' continued the General.

The valet obeyed.

'Now give me the brandy and water, or another dose. Do you hear?' he said, and Stalker administered it reluctantly.

The spectators retreated, while General Arlington wrote his memorandum, in a firm hand, and with evident decision. It took some little time, during which Fay, on the ottoman, held the rose, and thought almost tenderly of her uncle.

'An envelope and sealing-wax. My coat of arms,' ordered the General; and Stalker brought them.

'Will you have the goodness to witness this, Vicar—and you, Stalker?' was the next command; and the memorandum was duly witnessed.

'My act and deed,' said the General, and finally enclosed and sealed it with a huge seal. 'Now you may go, Stalker.'

The valet departed, much against his will, and the General gave the memorandum into Mr. Tenderton's care, with the following request:—

'Keep it till I ask you for it. Mademoiselle, my niece, is mistaken in fancying that I am dying.'

'Assuredly. You will live long, and be friends with Saar Gilbert, and burn the mortgages,' interrupted Fay.

He frowned, and waved his hand.

'As I was saying, she is mistaken. But you may survive me, Vicar; and if so, and if I have not asked for that paper, you can produce it at—at the proper time. You understand? You will not mention it, child?'

'It shall be sacred as your dying request,' rejoined Fay.

'Call Stalker, not—not Septimus. I am not well,' said the General, again turning pale—for the exertion and unusual decision had wearied him. 'You must not leave me, child. Will you promise?'

Fay was so terrified that she promised everything, and while Stalker and Mr. Tenderton helped her uncle to his room, she remained alone, wondering and apostrophising, in his splendid drawing-room. Mr. Tenderton soon reappeared, however, and said the General wished to see her for a moment. She found him in an easy-chair, recovered from his temporary exhaustion. They were again alone, and he held out his hand.

'In a week or so you must come and live with me, and then we will settle everything. You will be an ornament to my table, you know, and a comfort to me; and perhaps—but I won't promise. Don't engage yourself to Maxwell, or—or any one without my permission. You had better go now, before Septimus comes back; and I will let you know when to come again. Take this ring—it is of immense value; but don't wear it yet, you know. I am not prepared for the disclosures, but I will make them all—restitution, in short—restitution. You think George forgave us—me and our father? You will come when I send for you?'

'Yes,' said Fay decisively.

'Then God bless you, child! and—and pray for me; and remember me to Miss Oreburn, who understands me.'

One more embrace, and love budded for the uncle and niece. Was it too late?

CHAPTER LVII.

SUMMONED AGAIN.

'SAAR GILBERT, we have made the peace,' was Fay's greeting, when first she saw her friend on her return from the Manor.

She had found him and Aimée seated under a group of elms, upon the new-mown hay, in one of the fields belonging to the cottage.

'Then I trust peace may again shed her sleepy balms over us,' said Sir Gilbert. 'She has withdrawn them of late. What have you done to ensnare the venerable Cupid?'

'You must not jest, Saar Gilbert, for I fear he may die. Let me sit down on this hay, and recount the facts. How delicious is the scent! When last I passed through this meadow, Gilbert and I gathered cowslips by the river, and rowed up the stream; and now'—

A shade passed over Fay's face.

'Why did he not return with you and Maxwell? I thought he was bent on getting rid of his inheritance at the quickest. Tell me the secret of your power to enslave the hearts of the biped, young and old.'

'*Ma foi*, I have none with him! He placed himself immediately on the side of the *grand'mère*, and resisted me to the death. In vain—I was resolved. Monsieur Villy enrolled himself with me, and we had the pitched battle. The Marquise was severe, Mr. Oreburn magnificent, *mon fiancé* calm, I intractable. You imagine the scene. I die of the recollection. Madame *au lit*, at the extremity of excitement and indignation, swaying, grimacing, waving the hands like—I grieve to say—like her grand-daughter, Fay. Mr. Oreburn at her side, surveying Monsieur Villy haughtily, as the great peacock at the Court surveys the bantam, and condescending occasionally to interpret the French for the understanding of the law—also darting glances of contemptuous superiority at me. I balancing between tears and laughter at the serio-comic, and making faces at him, while I assured *la grand'mère* that I would return; and Monsieur Villy reasoning the points gravely, and indicating "the great issues involved," as he expressed it. Represent to yourself mirrors reflecting the scene, and you have the whole. Ah, here comes Elinor. We speak of my *fiancé*, Elinor; sit down and hear my adventures.'

Elinor seated herself.

'How did it all end? How did Maxwell and you gain so glorious a victory?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'I know not, for I made the rush, and left them to hurry to pack up my effects. I had no rest while I imagined the General—I mean my uncle—dying without the pardon of my father and me. I afterwards pacified Madame la Marquise, and we parted on the most amiable terms; but, *hélas!* I have promised to return, not immediately, but soon. Meanwhile, I write to her daily. It will be fatiguing, but she is old and feeble, and we owe *des égards* to age. But I failed to reassure Mr. Oreburn—indeed, I made not the attempt; I now wish I had, for he left even before we did, in order to procure another certificate from Saint Bévier le Coq, a village amongst the Vosges mountains. Why do they require two? Monsieur Villy entreated him to accompany us home, representing that his presence was needed; but he replied, *en empereur*, that, his escort being now unnecessary, he would return another way, and probably arrive as soon as we. I grieve to have offended him, but what could I do? I even entreated his pardon, but, on reconsidering my manner, I think it was rather humorous than penitent. Still he was occasionally kind as you, Saar Gilbert, and he has done me much service.'

Tears came into Fay's eyes.

'What sort of journey had you?' asked Elinor.

'It was so rapid that I forget. Monsieur Villy was silent, I *triste*.

I think he liked not his reception, and resented Gilbert's haughty adieux; but he said nothing—he is too cautious. A sunbeam could scarcely see into his mind.'

'Then even you failed to penetrate it,' laughed Sir Gilbert, 'yet your *beaux yeux* led him to France.'

'Mr. Oreburn declares it was *les beaux yeux de ma cassette* in perspective. He is certainly ineffably arrogant.'

'Your return is like sunshine in a November fog, Fay,' said Sir Gilbert. 'We have not laughed cheerily since you left, and Elinor has been especially melancholic.'

'*Ma mie*, you must revive!' exclaimed Fay, putting her hand in Elinor's. 'You should be gay, for all the aged rejoice in you. The Marquise trusts I may resemble the charming Mademoiselle Oreboorn, and the General commissions me to give you his remembrances, for you understand him.'

'What art did you practise to instil belief into the old infidel?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'I think it was conscience, and that good Mr. Tenderton has found its key,' answered Fay gravely; 'indeed, he was much affected.'

'How does he look when affected? Elinor, you also can describe him under these touching circumstances.'

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Maxwell, who came to learn the result of the morning's interview. When they had discussed it and Fay's previous adventures, he said that he was going to town the following day, adding,—

'Nothing could have detained me in the country so long, except this imperative business. I have neglected other matters, to which I must now attend; but I have left directions, and Mr. Oreburn will find all prepared.'

Just as he said the words, Gilbert walked into the field.

'Here he is!—here he is!' cried Fay, jumping up and running towards him. She held out both hands, and he took them, with the words,—

'It is all right, Fay; I have found Saint Bévier and the certificate.'

'Oh, I am so glad you have come home!—we only arrived last night,' she said, her face crimson with pleasure. 'We have made the peace, my uncle and I.'

He dropped her hands, for he saw Maxwell, and jealousy resumed its sway. He joined him and the rest, and Fay followed; he recounted his adventures, which were few, and culminated in his finding the church in which George Arlington was married, and securing the facsimile of the certificate he already possessed. Sir Gilbert observed that he had now made security doubly sure, and that he and Maxwell had managed the business well. Fay glanced from one to the other, and exclaimed naïvely,—

'Ah, Gilbert, I owe to you *la grandmère;* and to you, Monsieur Villy, the uncle. How rich I am become! I have them now, and I still have you all, but I love the old friends best.'

Gilbert chose to interpret this speech as indicative of her preference for Maxwell, and retorted that she would soon lose one of the new, as he had made his arrangements for his return to America; upon which she begged him to wait, at least until she had seen the General again.

'I have asked him to leave the mortgages to Saar Gilbert, and he will do it yet before he dies, or he will not have made the peace with God,' she said.

'Let the General be ever so well disposed to-day, Dr. Hope will turn him into the old groove to-morrow,' interrupted Maxwell.

'You are hard upon our Esculapius,' said Sir Gilbert. 'You do not envy him his prospective good fortune?'

'I would not stand in his shoes for all the gold of California. I would rather sweep out my own poor chambers than gather up the dust of the Manor. Hope was always a sneak, and the General is too great a coward to resist him now. He has left it too long. If Mademoiselle could be with him always, there might be a chance.'

'What do you say to gathering up this Manor dust, *ma petite?*' asked Sir Gilbert.

'I would restore it all to you, Saar Gilbert, then the poor would have golden cobwebs,' answered Fay.

'We seem to forget the "Power that shapes our ends,"' remarked Aimée softly. 'It is easy to say we will do this or that, but we seldom do it.'

'True, my philosopher. My motto of *Laissez-aller* is right after all. Drift, drift, drift, with the waves of fortune,' said Sir Gilbert sadly.

'Dear father! you will at least drift straight forward,' interposed Elinor.

The afternoon went on, and the little party was still conversing, sparring, and enjoying the delicious perfume of the hay and the songs of the haymakers, when Tom brought out tea. Somehow Gilbert had managed to throw himself on the hay at Fay's back, and Maxwell to get near Elinor. Aimée was sufficiently recovered to be sketching the distant waggons and haymakers. Sir Gilbert was watching her, and Winsome making cruel darts at persecuting flies.

'The strawberries and cream have been procured at the expense of the entire household in your honour, Fay. We can have no pudding to-morrow,' said Sir Gilbert, as those favourite delicacies appeared. 'You must sing us the last new French song in payment.'

'Provided you produce the psaltery, Gilbert the sackbut, and Elinor the dulcimer. We have not heard them at the cottage.'

'*Soit*,' acceded Sir Gilbert, and after the feast there was an open-air concert.

Tom brought out every portable instrument. Sir Gilbert took his violoncello, Gilbert a violin, and Elinor a guitar. Fay carried her instrument ever with her, in her magnificent voice.

They were interrupted in the course of an hour or so, by a mysterious message to Fay.

'You are wanted, Mademoiselle,' whispered Tom, fearing to break in upon the harmony of stringed instruments.

She rose from the hay and followed Tom to the orchard.

Gilbert wandered off after her. She had hurried to the cottage, with the intention of a quick return to the concert-room, but had been suddenly taken elsewhere. General Arlington's carriage was in the yard, and his valet, Stalker, on the doorstep. He accosted her at once solemnly.

'My master is asking for you, Ma'mselle. Dr. Hope won't let you be summoned, so I have taken upon myself to come; for I think a dying master's commands paramounter to a doctor's.'

'Dying!' exclaimed Fay.

'Very bad, at any rate, Ma'mselle, and the doctor have got it all to himself. Will you come?'

'Of course—at once,' replied Fay, jumping into the carriage, which was immediately on its road to the Manor.

Gilbert was met by Tom with this information.

'To the Manor! At this hour and alone?' cried he, returning to the hayfield. 'Father, Fay has gone, unprotected, to the Manor. Will you authorise me to follow her?'

'Follow her by all means,' replied Sir Gilbert.

Mr. Oreburn went to the hotel, ordered the fly, and was soon in pursuit of Fay.

CHAPTER LVIII.

'DEAD!'

WHEN Fay and Stalker reached the Manor, they were met in the hall by Dr. Hope, who addressed them angrily.

'Stalker, how dared you disobey my orders? Mademoiselle, your presence is undesirable. You cannot see General Arlington.'

'I obeyed my master's orders, sir. He told me to fetch the young lady,' replied Stalker.

'You know he is delirious, and you will have to answer for this,' said the doctor.

Meanwhile Fay threw off her hat and darted up the staircase. She remembered the room she had been in that morning, and entered it. The General was in bed, his housekeeper standing by his side. Fay heard the words,—

'Is she come? Will they let her come?'

'I am here, uncle,' she answered in person.

He smiled and put out his hand, then, turning to his housekeeper, explained.

'My niece, Marshall: my niecé, you know. My brother's only child, grand-daughter of the Marquise. She will be at the head of my household shortly; but she needn't displace you. Just tell Dr. Hope I don't want him at present; for I am going to sleep. He can see about my medicine, and about—well—about—as I was saying, the transfer, you know, the deeds, the—will, you understand?'

'Yes, sir,' said Marshall, glancing at Fay, who stood, young, handsome, excited, by her uncle's bedside, holding his hand.

'My dear, what is your name?' continued the General, when Marshall was gone. 'Say it slowly. Félicité Gabrielle, shortened into Fay. It sounds well added to Arlington, and you will be a charming addition. Hush! I hear Septimus. Not a word to him. Don't leave me; never mind what he says. I am in my senses, and could command an army. I am no more dying than you are; but tell Miss Oreburn that I am sorry we were not on our usual affectionate terms when we met last.'

'I am sure she is sorry also,' whispered Fay. 'They would all like to be friends with you, and that you should love one another, as the Bible says.'

'Hush! here he is. Don't let go my hand.'

Dr. Hope entered cautiously, and stole up to Fay's side.

'I think you had better withdraw, Mademoiselle. You have already induced one severe attack to-day; the second may be fatal,' he whispered.

'My uncle desires my presence, and I shall not leave him,' she replied composedly.

'This is scarcely time or place for the intrusion of a stranger; and, as a medical man, I must forbid it.'

'I am now his acknowledged niece, and I will no longer forsake him. We have been already too long estranged.'

The General pressed her hand.

'It seems indelicate, Mademoiselle—so young and alone. I must request you to give place to proper and authorised nurses.'

'We have made the peace, sir; and I shall not quit my uncle until he desires it.'

Another firm pressure.

'Allow me to feel his pulse, Mademoiselle.'

'There are two pulses, sir, said Fay, glancing at the other hand. The baffled doctor took it.

'His pulse is low. I insist'— he began.

'Wanted, sir,' interrupted Stalker, appearing suddenly.

Dr. Hope let go the General's hand and went towards Stalker, who whispered that Mr. Oreburn was below. Not doubting but that the former had come to fetch Fay, Dr. Hope left the room readily. When he was gone, the General resumed his broken conversation.

'Dr. Hope has my interest at heart; but I like you near me. When I recover, I shall alter—hush! he is coming back. I am glad those Oreburns acknowledge they have been in the wrong, you know; and I quite forgive them—I do, upon my honour. They have been kind to you, and you to them, I daresay.'

'They have been angels to me, and I have given them much trouble. But I begin a new life henceforth,' returned Fay.

'Not a bad idea; so will I. Hold fast my hand; stay by me, kiss me; tell your father I—I—forgive him, you know, and I think I can go to sleep. A new life—not a bad idea. God help us, and forgive us our sins, for Christ's sake. Amen.'

Fay stood over him and kissed him with real affection. He was her father's brother, and she began to feel how close is the tie of parentage, in spite of many wrenches. She sat down by his bedside, still holding his hand, and prayed to a long-suffering God for his restoration to health, and for their joint pardon. Her tears flowed fast, and she remembered how a merciful Father had given back Aimée to their supplications, and that she had been alone with her, as she was now with her uncle. She reproached herself for what she now considered her misconduct, and tortured her mind by thinking that, if she had been different, he might have been more merciful. She sat some time breathless, lest she should arouse him from the deep sleep into which he had apparently fallen, then, tired, body and mind, with the events of the day, she also dropped asleep.

A heavy twilight was on the curtained room, and as she slumbered uneasily the shadows deepened. Her pale face and black hair shone out in the darkness as they lay drooped upon the pillow of the bed, and the large diamond of the ring her uncle had given her gleamed on the hand that clasped his.

This intense repose did not last long. The door again opened cautiously, and Dr. Hope crept in. Fay started, put her finger on her lip, and murmured,—

Asleep! hand in hand, face to face!—*Page* 353.

'He sleeps.'

'Mr. Oreburn has come to fetch you, Mademoiselle,' whispered the doctor.

'I shall not go,' replied Fay.

Dr. Hope bent over the patient, and again withdrew.

'Where—is—she?' sounded feebly from the bed.

'Here, dear uncle,' answered Fay.

She felt a slight pressure of the hand, and, listening for more words, fancied she heard 'A—new—life.' She tried to rouse herself to watch, but, after a while, finding that he was sleeping, slept again.

It was nearly dark when Dr. Hope, unable to restrain either his own or Gilbert's impatience, once more opened the door. The restless Gilbert followed him to the landing, and stood without. The quiet was so intense that the doctor paused to listen for a sound; but none came, not even a breath. He walked gently towards the bed, and Gilbert advanced to the threshold of the room. The mirrors reflected the dim light that crept through the white blinds, but the sleepers were nearly invisible. A pair of clasped hands and a glittering ring shone in the obscurity. Dr. Hope paused before this picture of reconciliation and peace. Asleep!—hand in hand, face to face!

Stooping a little, he heard Fay's regular breathing. He paused another moment, then touched, almost timidly, the clasped hands. Bending low over the General, he listened—listened, feeling his pulse. The silence and darkness seemed to deepen, and Gilbert, irresolute on the threshold, felt a sudden chill. At last, after a long pause, Dr. Hope started back, withdrew one pace, and uttered the solemn word—

'Dead!'

'Dead!' echoed Gilbert, advancing towards Fay.

Yes, the General had passed away in his sleep, quietly, just as good men are said to die—passed away with the hand of her he had injured in his, and her words on his lips. His 'new life' must begin in another world—hers in this.

Gilbert took her in his arms and carried her down-stairs, sleeping still, while that Last Word sounded through the household. She awoke in the light of the hall. He put his arm round her, tenderly as a brother, and whispered—

'You must come with me, dear Fay.'

'I cannot leave him, Gilbert,' she murmured uneasily. 'Let me go back to him; we have made the peace.'

'Trust me this once, dear. Come home; he does not want you now.

He led her, bewildered, half yielding, half resisting, and understanding but in part, to the door, and placed her in the fly, still awaiting his orders. They drove away slowly in the calm of the summer night.

'Why will you not let me stay, Gilbert? We were so happy!' she asked dreamily.

He took both her hands in his, and told her gently that all was over. It was a moonless night, and he did not, at first, know how she bore it, for she did not speak. At last she burst into pitiful sobbing, and let her head droop on his shoulder.

'Dear Fay, be comforted; we all love you,' he whispered.

'I know it; and he, too, might have loved me, had we tried,' she sobbed.

'Be sure he loves you now,' breathed Gilbert, still holding her cold hands; and so they reached the cottage.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE WILL.

A LONG train of carriages, tenants, and domestics followed General Arlington's remains to their last home. Dr. Hope, as acknowledged heir, was chief mourner. While the coffin rested under the lych-gate, and the melancholy procession formed, a female figure, in deep mourning, was led by a gentleman through the private approach to the Vicarage, nearly opposite. To the surprise of the spectators, she took her place silently beside Dr. Hope, while her companion fell behind with Mr. Moneypenny.

It was Fay, conducted by William Maxwell. No persuasions could induce her to relinquish a resolution she had formed to follow her uncle to the grave: and now, as sole real mourner, she nerved herself for this, her first and last public token of parentage. With her thick veil closely drawn, and restraining her sobs with a great effort, she went into the little church where she had so often seen with hate him whom she began to love now that it was too late. At that moment she forgave also him who stood by her side, and who, although conducting himself with a seemly gravity, considered her presence an unwarrantable intrusion.

Mr. Tenderton's voice and manner calmed her at first, but when she stood by the grave, she sobbed audibly, and people wondered, naturally, who it was who showed such grief for one not over-much beloved. As the solemn but hopeful service proceeded, however, she listened and grew calm. The remorse she had been nourishing faded before the immortal words, 'I am the resurrection and the life,' and her own simple phrase, 'We have made the peace,' mingled with them. She remembered her uncle's last prayer, and hoped, in trembling, they might conclude that peace in a better land.

She held in her hand a wreath of white roses, which she dropped silently on the velveted coffin, as it was lowered into its place. She had said, while forming it, 'Hitherto I have given him thorns—I must now replace them by flowers.' She trembled so that Maxwell came to support her.

When all was over, he led her by a short side walk through the churchyard to the Vicarage. Elinor was awaiting her within the private gate, and took her, sobbing piteously, in her arms.

'We must all die! Oh, Elinor!—oh, Monsieur Villy!' she cried, shuddering, 'how terrible it is!'

They led her to a neighbouring seat in a retired spot, and placed her between them. By degrees she grew calm.

'You are both so good!' she said at last, while her tears fell on her hands clasped in Elinor's. 'And I have been bad, proud, rebellious, jealous, wicked. Can you forgive me?'

'There is nothing to forgive,' replied Elinor. 'Dear child, be calm.'

'Oh, but I have made you weep, and yet he loves you best—is it not, Monsieur Villy? Let us also make the peace, lest we die.'

She rose, and stood before Maxwell and Elinor. Her black clothes trailed about her, her eyes were red and swollen with weeping. She felt inspired to some act of self-devotion by the penitence of the last week.

'I must say it now, for to-morrow my mind may change. Monsieur Villy, I have told Elinor that you love me best, and that I will never give you up, because you have been so long my *fiancé*. Elinor, I have told Monsieur Villy that you are proud, and do not care for him. I have intermeddled between you because—because I have been foolish and jealous, and desirous of his whole affection. You know, *ma mie*, how I hate the half of anything. But you love her best—is it not, Monsieur Villy?'

It is impossible to say to what lengths she might have gone in her imaginary restitution, had not further confessions been stayed by the appearance of a servant, who told Maxwell that Mr. Moneypenny was waiting for him. He was annoyed at the interruption, for he would have given much to hear what more Fay had to say; but Elinor was relieved. As he hastened to rejoin his uncle, who was awaiting him near the church, he heard the words—

'Fay, how could you? Indeed, you have no right to compromise me thus.'

'Compromise!—what does she mean?' muttered Maxwell, as he hurried to Mr. Moneypenny.

'My lawyer must keep time, sir,' said that gentleman. 'If young ladies choose to make themselves ridiculously conspicuous, men have no call to abet 'em. Drive quick to the Manor, Smith. I'm everybody's executor.'

Mr. Moneypenny did not know of Fay's relationship to General Arlington, and was much put out at having been named the executor for the deceased, not wishing to be mixed up with Dr. Hope. Mr. Pouncefort had been made co-trustee, and was awaiting him and Maxwell at the Manor, together with the lawyers and Mr. Tenderton. Stalker was also present when the will was read in the large dining-room.

Mr. Customs, senior, read it with due solemnity, and it did not take long. Unlike most wills, it answered, nay, surpassed, the expectations of all named in it. Dr. Hope was not only heir, but residuary legatee, and, on the sole condition of taking the name of Arlington, was to have the Manor, and all the landed property. He comported himself modestly as this happy fact was announced, and was doubtless ready to accept the terms, though he did not say so. As there was no acknowledged relative nearer than Mrs. Owler, to whom the General had left one hundred and fifty pounds a year for life, his succession was not likely to be disputed. All that he had to pay out of this great wealth would be twenty pounds a year to Stalker, a few small legacies to other servants, a hundred complimentary pounds to the executors, and the usual heavy expenses for the funeral and domestic 'weeds of woe.' She who had alone mourned the testator sincerely was not named, and Maxwell's hopes fell.

'There may be a codicil,' he said grimly, as he ran over in his mind the possibility of disputing the will.

Meanwhile Mr. Tenderton was fumbling in his coat-pocket, and finally drew forth a paper.

'General Arlington gave this into my charge, with the request that I should not open it during his life. As he is gone, it may be proper to read the contents. Mr. Customs, I give it into your care,' he said, in some confusion.

He delivered up the sealed letter, glancing at Dr. Hope, who stepped forward and retreated. It was agreed that the lawyer should open and read the letter. It was as follows:—

'I, Austen Arlington, of Arlington Manor, do hereby declare this to be a codicil to my last will, and the only codicil in existence. If the young lady residing with Sir Gilbert Oreburn, and known as Mademoiselle Fay, should be lawfully proved to be daughter of my brother, George Arlington, and born in wedlock, I give and bequeath to her all the mortgages due to me by Sir Gilbert Oreburn on Oakwoods Court and property.

'Witness my hand,
'AUSTEN ARLINGTON.

'Witnessed by
'HENRY TENDERTON, *Clerk.*
'THOMAS STALKER, *Valet.*'

There was an awakening of dormant interest now, and the words, 'Mademoiselle Fay! His brother's child! Impossible!—incredible!' were repeated. Dr. Hope maintained his apparent composure; but Maxwell could scarcely suppress a bravo. Executors and lawyers inquired if there was any reason to believe in such a relationship. Dr. Hope replied calmly that it was supposed that the young lady thus indiscreetly brought forward was the illegitimate daughter of Mr. George Arlington.

'But,' he added, 'this is of no consequence, for the General was not in his right mind when he wrote this letter.'

'It is steadily written, and sealed with his coat of arms,' remarked Mr. Moneypenny pleasantly.

'Did you know the contents of this document?' asked the doctor, glancing from the clergyman to the valet. 'It was written the day he died, when he was in delirium.'

'I did not. I watched him write it, and then, at his request, witnessed it,' said Mr. Tenderton. 'He appeared in his right mind.'

'Never saw my master more collected in my life,' said Stalker.

'Had he been himself, he could not have written anything so palpably absurd. He has been worked upon by the young lady, and—and others, until he lost his balance,' said Dr. Hope, striving to speak calmly. 'But under no circumstances could this memorandum hold good, since the entail on Oakwoods has been cut off, and the transfer of the property to General Arlington completed. The mortgage deeds may be destroyed to-morrow, and the property is mine, as the General's unworthy heir.'

'I fancy Mr. Oreburn's signature to the transfer deed is wanting,' broke in Maxwell, 'consequently the mortgages are still unpaid, and the estate still in Sir Gilbert Oreburn's possession.'

'Excuse me; you are mistaken. I met Mr. Oreburn at the station the day of his return from abroad, and he told me that he was going straight to Messrs. Customs' office to sign the deed,' said Dr. Hope, bowing superciliously.

If this had been done, Maxwell was not aware of it; but, knowing Gilbert's hot-headed mistrust of himself, he felt that it was possibly effected without his knowledge. If so, Fay's chances were at an end

'What was the good of the General writing that codicil at all, if there were no mortgages?' asked Mr. Moneypenny.

'Just so. Had he been in his senses, he would not have willed what was no longer in existence,' retorted Dr. Hope.

'They have already paid for the Court. The kid has literally been seethed in its mother's milk,' remarked Maxwell caustically. 'But if the deeds are not fully signed, they have at least changed mortgagees. And if you reflect a little, the General must have been in expectation of Mr. Oreburn's return, and been cognizant of the delay of his signature, when he wrote the document.'

'Certainly, certainly,' from more voices than one.

'If the deed, as I suppose, is not signed, and if Miss Arlington inherits the mortgages, we shall have to begin all over again,' said Maxwell, addressing Mr. Customs.

'You know that the girl can no more claim them than you can!' exclaimed Dr. Hope angrily, 'and that she is no more Arlington than you. How can you carry on a farce that we hissed off the stage ten years ago?'

'Just to make a success of it. Luck changes,' replied Maxwell.

Mr. Pouncefort asked the real history of Fay. Dr. Hope hastily gave his version of it. Maxwell maliciously let him affirm that no certificate of the marriage of George Arlington could be found; and did not interrupt him when he declared Fay to be a designing Frenchwoman, urged on by Sir Gilbert Oreburn. But Mr. Tenderton ventured to suggest that the General had acknowledged her in his presence; upon which the doctor repeated that he could prove him to be mad at that time. Some discussion naturally followed, which led Dr. Hope to say that Sir Gilbert had kept Fay at the Court to annoy General Arlington. It was evidently his plan to espouse the cause of his deceased patron against the world. Mr. Moneypenny remarked drily that, had this been the case, Sir Gilbert had only to publish the real facts; and the doctor replied that he was silent on Fay's account.

'After all, she holds the mortgages!' said Maxwell.

'There are two to that bargain,' cried the doctor, facing him for the first time, in his annoyance.

'True; and two strings occasionally collide,' replied Maxwell, with a glance so unequivocal that the doctor could scarcely misunderstand it.

He turned and moved away uneasily, muttering something about Chancery.

'Keep out of that!' said dry Mr. Moneypenny. 'If Law is to have the oyster, we may as well let Customs and William share it.'

'At any rate, we may let the dispute rest till legitimacy is proved,' remarked Mr. Customs.

'Then it need not rest long,' said Maxwell, following Dr. Hope, as he walked towards a window to conceal his anger.

He stood midway between his adversary and the rest of the party, and while he slowly drew a paper from his pocket, continued, in counsel-fashion, to torment his opponent, and mystify judge and jury.

'This discoloured fragment will set us all by the ears again. It is only a scrap of paper, yet it contains "the head and front of our offending." If I mistake not, the Manor is entailed on Mr. George Arlington and his heirs, if he have any?'

'You do mistake, and the whole property is mine, heirs or no heirs; and the mortgages are mine, transfer or no transfer,' replied the doctor savagely.

'We shall see. Read that,' said Maxwell, giving Dr. Hope the paper he held.

The doctor unfolded it. He did not at first understand the cramped French writing it contained; but, after a little consideration, he made out the certificate of marriage. His countenance changed, and he seemed about to tear the paper; but Maxwell laid a firm hand on it, and said slowly and coldly,—

'It would be of no use; for we have a copy. Mr. Oreburn has visited the Protestant church where the marriage was solemnised, and has procured one from the register. I trust I have avenged my sister.'

Their eyes met, and, to judge by the evil expression of Dr. Hope's, Maxwell certainly had avenged his sister.

CHAPTER LX.

THE UNSELFISH SELFISH.

'THE fact is now what it has always been. I have ever been General Arlington's niece—I am so still. He was convinced at the last, and made restitution by acceding to my wishes. He gives me the mortgages in order that I may restore them to Saar Gilbert. My friend, they are yours, and it is well to think that my uncle was just before he died.'

Fay was surrounded by her friends, who were vainly trying to make her understand her new position.

'I hope you did not use that naughty word,' said Sir Gilbert.

'Indeed, I think so; but he knew no French. They are, however, no longer *maudits*, but blessed, since they give us back the Court. May we not return to it at once—to-morrow at the latest? Say, Monsieur Villy—you who have the law at the ends of your fingers. Let us leave this *triste* place before the hop-picking. A thousand pardons, Elinor—your cottage is delightful, but the Court is best.'

She was seated between Sir Gilbert and Maxwell, and had regained her natural vivacity. Gilbert was watching her, as usual, while Elinor and Aimée sat side by side apart. Moonlight was streaming through the window, and fell on Fay's glossy head, and on the white dresses of the sisters. Maxwell had been to the office of Messrs. Customs since the morning, and had only just returned.

'We must yet have patience,' he said. 'It was a fortunate circumstance that Mr. Oreburn had not signed the agreement, for I find that the delay his absence caused prevented the General signing. He chose to be the last to complete the deed, for some reason unknown, and therefore it is not valid, and the property is, or will be, virtually yours, Mademoiselle.'

There was a general cry of astonishment.

'Not signed?' said Sir Gilbert. 'Have we been all this time moving in a circle, only to find ourselves where we were at first? And are we really to hold our lands as serfs to this liege damsel?'

'Oh, Saar Gilbert, talk not so. My uncle would not sign because he acknowledged the justice of my demand. Let us be thankful that all is yours again. Monsieur Villy, assure him of it.'

She laid her hand on Maxwell's arm, and turned from one to the other. Gilbert started, as if touched himself by the light touch she gave his supposed rival. He came into the moonlight, and stood before her.

'An Oreburn must be just, Mademoiselle. When we can repay the loans of your ancestors, then, and not till then, the property will be clear. Now it is yours.'

'*Ma foi!* but you are again *revêche*, monsieur. I have thought you almost amiable of late; still the power is not yours, but Saar Gilbert's.'

'We should have had none, Fay, but for our *revêche* Bushranger,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Let us be thankful for his energy, and—may I venture to say?—obstinacy. We owe him much gratitude. But for him you would not have gone to Brittany, not seen the Marquise, not have found the certificate, not convinced the amiable uncle of your illustrious ancestry, and we should all have been disinherited together.'

Gilbert made an impatient gesture, and, looking at Fay, caught her eyes. How lustrous they were in the moonlight! She turned them on Maxwell with that 'Monsieur Villy' of hers, always so irritating to Gilbert, and said,—

'I trust you to arrange that what my uncle has given me shall be "transferred" to Saar Gilbert. You see, I have that word, as if I had been born speaking it; and that we all return to the Court at once.'

'Our natural enemy, Septimus Hope, will dispute everything,' replied Maxwell. 'He has already expressed his determination to declare the codicil invalid, and to throw the affairs into Chancery, if we put in a claim for the Manor, which is, to all intents and purposes, entailed.'

'I care not for the Manor, but that Saar Gilbert should possess his own; though I confess I should like, as the sagacious Stokes says, to *circumbend* Dr. Hope. I trust him not.'

'Oh, Fay, that is ungenerous and unchristian,' spoke, in low, measured words, the quiet Aimée.

'You mistake me entirely, Aimée,' she said excitedly. 'I have seen through the doctor from the first, and have ever despised him. He is welcome to his inheritance, since the Court is ours, and you pine for it, angel, as do I. Oh! entreat these, our commanders, that we return. I die for my *appartement*, as you for yours. I long for the privacy of the woods, where Arbitère shall no more say, "Mam'selle, do put on your hat, for every one sees you." Villy *mon chat* is ever there; he takes possession for us; let us follow him. Gilbert, you love the Court—will you not be on my side?'

Gilbert drew near Fay.

'I love many things that I cannot possess, Fay. I love—yes, I love the Court, but it is no longer ours; it is either yours, or to be sold for you. Hush! hear me out. If justice be done in this country, where her scales are not always evenly balanced, you will be mistress of our home, as you are, perhaps, of our hearts. Let me congratulate you for the first and last time on all the gifts that fortune has showered on you of late. God knows I wish you well, and shall reverently thank Him in my distant home if I hear that you wear your honours nobly.'

'Gilbert, you must not—you shall not leave us!' she said. 'I think you are displeased with me, and, indeed, I am *volage;* but—but you know that I have gained nothing but the name of Arlington, since all the rest is Saar Gilbert's and yours.'

'Fay, that can never be. We own nothing but our honour, save this poor cottage, which is Elinor's. I shall try my fortune once more, and if I can earn wealth—well, the great debt may yet be paid, and—oh! Fay, you and I may meet on equal terms.'

Silence suddenly fell on the little party, and each individual felt that in this 'witching hour' the heart-throbs were quickened either by acute pain or pleasure—which was it? Fay could not tell, although the tears, as yet scarcely dried, crept again slowly down her cheeks, and glistened in the moonlight.

'Let us come out into the night, and still the restless fever of a fitful day by the cool influence of the stars,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Aimée, will you try? Fay, *ma petite*, it will be better than this useless discussion of dead questions. Let us forget the melancholy past in this silvery present. The moon speaks to us.'

'Ah, she is divine!' exclaimed Fay; 'but her light is sad to-night, and she seems to weep for the day.'

They went out, and wandered into the well-shorn fields—Gilbert and Fay first; then Maxwell and Elinor; finally, Sir Gilbert supporting Aimée.

'My darling is sad to-night,' said Sir Gilbert tenderly, 'yet she is, I hope, untroubled by the untold romances that are weaving around us. I wish Maxwell would end them by proposing for Fay, and so stave off poor Gilbert's misery, for I fear he is quite undone. I live in a home of mystery, and fail to understand mine own children.'

'Dear papa!' sighed Aimée, pressing her father's arm.

Truly he little knew what was passing near him, even at that moment, or what called forth the sigh from Aimée; but he and she stood to gaze on the river and the fields, as they glittered and shimmered in the moonlight, while the others wandered on. He did not imagine that his chance desire to be within the glory of the night had given the opportunity Maxwell so much longed for, and seized—for Elinor, not for Fay. We will break in upon his speech, and listen, as Elinor listens, breathlessly, as is meet when true love tells his tale.

'If I could dare to hope, now that the imaginary obstacle is removed by death, I feel that I could conquer every difficulty. I have waited long.'

Elinor, timid in all that concerned her own happiness, though brave for others, trembled in unselfish mistrust.

'If it were not for Fay,' she said.

'You have not promised her, as you did her uncle, never to marry while she lives? Do not let her come between us. You cannot know—you have not felt'—

'I do—I have,' interrupted Elinor. 'Has it been nothing to believe that you loved Fay best all these sad years? Oh, if I could be sure she had not set her heart upon you!'

'What is her young, fickle heart to yours, even if she had? But she has not. Pray forget her, and yield me one short moment's happiness!'

His prayer was granted, and there, beneath the trees, in the hush of moonlight and the perfume of the summer evening, with the distant river murmuring, and the cattle slumbering mid the dew, Elinor Oreburn forgot, for the first time in her troubled life, every one but him she loved.

CHAPTER LXI.

TOO GLAD TO BE LONG SAD.

It is again sultry midday heat, and that never-to-be-forgotten moonlight is of the past. Sir Gilbert and Maxwell are pacing the hot road, as if the sun were not pouring his rays perpendicularly upon them. Maxwell has told Sir Gilbert how 'I love my love, and my love loves me.' It is a mile from the Cottage gate to the Castle Lodge, but the excited peripatetics forget distance, sun-strokes, and heart-complaints—no, we mistake, for of heart-complaints they speak. Even Sir Gilbert loses his *nonchalance*, and exclaims, with unnatural vehemence,—

'I do not understand—I do not believe it. I hope you have not been playing false and loose with Fay. I trust I may not be deceived in you, William Maxwell.'

'I hope I may not end in hating the girl who seems born to come between me and happiness,' said Maxwell hotly. 'I have never ceased to think of Miss Oreburn as the only woman I could love since I first saw her; and I have tried to forget her with all my might. I believed her indifferent to me, and knew that you would never favour me; I offended my uncle, who has not yet forgiven me; I kept out of the country until imperatively summoned to Mr. Butterfield; I have even avoided her since I have been back, supposing she disliked me; I have tried to think of nothing but law for seven long years'—

'Veritably a Jacobean service,' interjected Sir Gilbert, smiling, in spite of his evident annoyance.

'And now that I find we have been all this time at cross purposes, thanks to General Arlington, we are still to be sundered on account of his niece,' continued Maxwell, his indignation culminating as Sir Gilbert's warmth decreased.

'The General again! I thought we had done with that contumacious valetudinarian, who swallowed us all up like so many nauseous drugs, and now consigns us to the tender mercies of his doctor. *Le roi est mort; vive le roi!* But I do not see what the defunct hero had to do with you and Elinor. He proposed, she refused him, and the aged Damon avenged himself. This seems rather favourable to your suit than otherwise.'

'But she promised never to marry any but him as long as he lived. Thinking of me as I of her, Sir Gilbert, she yet felt bound by this promise until the other day, when kindly death removed the obstacle which rises anew in budding life. Now you understand. Are we to be still kept apart by an imaginary duty?'

'Promised never to marry any one but the General!' cried Sir Gilbert, pausing in his rapid walk, and facing Maxwell. 'And this to avert my ruin! I do indeed understand! My tender, devoted child has sacrificed herself to me, her most undeserving father!'

'And will yet sacrifice herself to you, to Fay, to her sister, to any one, if you have not strength to prevent it, Sir Gilbert,' said Maxwell, thoughtless of all but Elinor. 'I have drawn from her with difficulty that I am not indifferent to her; but she thinks first of others, and will give me up if they require her. Yet I am in a position to marry her, and place her in her proper sphere. I am gradually making fame and fortune, and with her I could overcome all difficulties.'

'Allow me a moment,' said Sir Gilbert, pressing his hand over his eyes; and Maxwell paused in his excited discourse.

They walked on slowly and in silence. Sir Gilbert glanced back through the years, and saw his patient daughter bearing tyranny, disappointment, rivalry, and poverty, for the sake of others; remembered her proud humility, her sad submission, her melancholy efforts for cheerfulness,—and all to save him who made no attempt to save himself.

'Are you sure she loves you?—has she told you so?' he asked suddenly, looking Maxwell in the face, half haughtily, half entreatingly.

'I should not have dared to speak to you thus if I had not believed it,' said Maxwell diffidently, yet proudly.

'Then you have my consent, and may God bless you both! Leave me, and go and tell your uncle; then return to us.'

Sir Gilbert held out his hand, which Maxwell grasped with an inarticulate 'Thank you;' and so they parted—one to hurry to Castle House, the other to return to the Cottage.

Sir Gilbert walked slowly, still retracing the past and thinking of Elinor; he understood her at last, and all her self-devotion!

When he reached the Cottage he gave orders that she should be requested to join him in the seat under the big elms, whither he went. She came to him immediately. As he watched the lithe, elegant figure hasten across the meadow, he sighed, and said mentally,—

'She would become a coronet, and she marries—a brief.'

But when he saw the flushed face and pathetic eyes, and felt that she knew why he had summoned her, he called back his natural manner, and rose to meet her. Taking her hand, he placed her by his side. She was the only one of his children who personally resembled him, and they had never looked more alike than at that moment. Still holding her hand, he said playfully,—

'Is what I have heard true, my best of daughters?—is this last the "bright particular star" of your constellation of lovers?—and am I eclipsed? Is it the old, old story, my darling?'

Elinor's fair head drooped, and Sir Gilbert saw that Maxwell had told him true. He put his arm round her waist and drew her very close to him.

'I have heard all, and know what you have sacrificed and suffered for my sake. I shall now repay you by making the greatest sacrifice of my life—the relinquishing you to another. But let me first be very sure you love him. I once probed you, and thankfully found you unwounded; how is it now? Could we go through that marriage-service honestly, as before God?'

'Yes, dear father,' said Elinor quietly, though she trembled.

'And walk hand-in-hand with him through the up-hill path of life, as you have hitherto done with me, your unstable protector?' answered Sir Gilbert, his voice quivering.

'Yes; but I have said that I can never leave you.'

'My darling, you will forsake father and mother for him you love; and Maxwell is, I believe, worthy, even of your love—for, being "constant," he must e'en be "perfect."'

'Do you really like him, father?' asked Elinor, flushing with a sudden joy. 'Oh, how happy I should be, were it not for Fay! We feared you disliked him, as Gilbert does.'

'*I* am not jealous—and you must forget Fay.'

'I cannot; I could not make her wretched—I have told him so.'

'You intend that he, you, and Fay, should sink gradually into the slumber of bachelor and spinsterhood? Your radiant blush and smile belie the "Yes" on your lips. And again I repeat that it is I who shall make the sacrifice. Once I laid my commands upon you not to marry; now I shall impose the "love, honour, and obey" upon you, insisting particularly on the last clause.'

'Dear father, I can never leave you. I can never tell Fay; he has been the dream of her life.'

'And of yours, apparently; but we must face it. I am afraid—nay, I am sure—she loves him; but she is still almost a child. We must tell her gradually—gently,—or she must find it out. I would not tell her for the world; a scene with Fay would make me wish my future son-in-law—well—on the woolsack. How would he look there—eh, Elinor?'

'What if I were to write to her, father? I could not tell her—indeed, I could not tell any one but Aimée.'

'"She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm i' the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek."

This has been your case, my Elinor. Thank God that the worm has not gnawed to the core! Before *he* comes, let us quite understand one another. Tell me all the secret of the past, so that we may start afresh, untrammelled for the future. I have been blind; you must gently remove the film from my eyes.'

Sir Gilbert and Elinor sat under the shadow of the elms, until the veil was removed that had been between them, and the father and daughter were again happy in mutual confidence.

Meanwhile Maxwell was, in his manner, also engaged in clearing off a similar film. When he parted from Sir Gilbert he hastened up the drive to his uncle's house, and on his way fell in with his sister. Lizzie had not recovered from her disappointment, but had grown morose and intractable. Sorrow had soured, not purified her. There had been no confidence between her and her relatives, and even her aunt failed to engage her in further disclosure, either of Dr. Hope's conduct or her own feelings towards him. She possibly hoped against hope, that now that her lover was rich and free he might repent and return. Her brother laid his hand on her shoulder suddenly, and said,—

'Lizzie, congratulate me. I am the happiest fellow in the world!'

Arrested while thinking of her own unhappiness, she answered brusquely,—

'It is too soon to be happy yet.'

Maxwell, who had loved his mother sincerely, and been a devoted son to her, felt the reproof, and his joy was damped.

'Lizzie, you must rejoice with me. I repeat that I am the happiest and luckiest fellow in the world,' he said. 'I have proposed at last, and been accepted.'

'Rather soon upon the uncle's death. Is she really to have all the property?' asked Lizzie, suddenly interested.

'I thought *you*, at least, understood me,' exclaimed Maxwell in a vexed tone. 'It is not Fay, it is Miss Oreburn.'

This roused his sister, who, like Sir Gilbert, did not believe it. She said so, and, when assured of the truth, did her best to congratulate him. But congratulations were difficult to her who had expected so long to receive them. He knew it, and, drawing her arm within his, said affectionately that he hoped to give her a sister who would compensate to her for many losses.

Their uncle and aunt were standing together under a large cedar on the lawn, as they approached the house. The worthy couple were discussing them, and they heard Mrs. Moneypenny say,—

'You are as hard as—as a hippopotamus!'

'Aunt, I hope you are not calling names,' began Maxwell.

'If she is, it is you who have taught her, sir,' continued Mr. Moneypenny, boiling over. 'I said I should give you a bit of my mind, and I'll do it.'

The old gentleman stood with his hands behind him, facing his nephew. Lizzie took refuge with her aunt.

'I tell you what it is, sir, I have had enough of all this coming and going, for the sake of Sir Gilbert Oreburn and his family, and that Mam'selle Fay—or rather Miss Arlington. Not that I owe any of 'em any grudge. I can afford to be generous, like the rest of the world, now they are down. But I haven't brought you up, and educated you, that you should make a fool of yourself. I understand your conduct better than you fancy, and find that a mere child has been at the bottom of it. It is to her we owe the honour of your return after three years' absence, and for her sake you have routed France, and ransacked Ashton, until you have it all your own way. Very indelicate, to say the least of it, to take her to her uncle's funeral, then go at once to look after her money. I daresay you have proposed by this time.'

'I really have, uncle,' replied William, annoyed and amused at this continued misconception.

'Well, I *am* surprised!' said his aunt, tossing her jewels.

'I am not,' continued his uncle. 'But I'll have no love-making and trash going on from this house. I never did much in that line myself—never found time for it—and I won't have my retirement disturbed by such fandangoes.'

'Ladies don't usually come to the gentlemen,' remarked Mrs. Moneypenny.

'They are not what they were in our day, my dear. And now, Lizzie, a word with you. Are you also going to be married? If you are, you might be more agreeable; if not, you had better make yourself so, or you'll never get a husband.'

'I don't want one,' said Lizzie pettishly.

'Prove it, and don't moon about as if you'd been jilted. I've no sympathy with broken-hearted young women. I should be happy to horsewhip any man who has ill-treated you, or even to go in for breach of promise; but as that would bring you before an ill-natured public and spoil your future prospects, I think we'll try a better plan. We'll take the high line, and show a certain conceited puppy that we don't care a button for him; then I'll invite all the eligible young men in the county to dinner, and give you another chance. If this doesn't please you, perhaps you may find an abode with your brother and his *fiancée!* At any rate, *she* proposed often enough.'

'You mistake, uncle,' interrupted Maxwell quietly. 'My *fiancée* has twice refused me, and scarcely yet really accepted me. The lady for whom I have proposed is not Miss Arlington, but Miss Oreburn.'

'Then you have even more impudence and conceit than I gave you credit for,' said Mr. Moneypenny, turning his back on the group.

'Do not go away, uncle. Even Sir Gilbert gave me a patient hearing, and surely you will wish me God-speed. I know I have offended you; but I dared not tell you why. Absence was the only cure for my disease, and absenting myself from Miss Oreburn, I incurred your displeasure for what seemed my ingratitude. Pray forgive me!'

Maxwell followed his uncle across the lawn, and at last arrested him.

'Are you in earnest?' he asked. 'I can't believe that Miss Oreburn, much less Sir Gilbert, would have anything to say to such *canaille* as we are.'

'Speak to him, uncle, as man to man, and you will understand him better. He knows that I have only my brains to live by.'

'He does, does he? And you can afford to keep a wife, the daughter of a baronet, a young lady who might make a grand match—on your brains in this age when brains are brass, speculation gold?'

'I will try, God willing—with her father's consent and yours, uncle.'

Maxwell's voice faltered a little, and his uncle coughed, made believe to sneeze, and finally took out his handkerchief.

'These gnats and this heat are enough to choke one!' he said, rubbing his face.

Mrs. Moneypenny came bustling towards them. She put one beringed, chubby hand on her husband's shoulder, the other on her nephew's, and burst forth in a stream of congratulations, reproaches, entreaties, and exhortations. Elinor was her ideal of perfection, and to see her married to Maxwell her ambition; so she spared no epithets that could express her pleasure, or entreat and command the approval of her more phlegmatic partner.

'Pshaw! Nonsense! I don't believe it,' was all she could get from him in return, with an accompaniment of coughs.

'Shake hands, uncle, and promise not to turn me out of doors till you have seen Sir Gilbert,' said Maxwell.

'We shall see—we shall see,' said the uncle, wringing the offered hand and hurrying away.

CHAPTER LXII.

MR. MONEYPENNY SPEAKS OUT.

As Maxwell entered the Cottage, after his many confessions, he was met by Fay. She said she wished to speak one little word to him, and he wondered if it were of congratulation or reproach. He followed her into the whilom office.

'Do not be alarmed, Monsieur Villy—it is of business I would speak,' she said. 'Last night I was sad and confused, and failed to make you understand me; but to-day I recover my senses, and begin to realise my responsibility. I have been awake all the night, thinking; therefore am I perhaps serious and wearied, and shall fatigue you; but I endeavour to improve, now that I become conscious of my faults. You have promised long ago to help me, and now I claim your promise. Will you so arrange the affairs at once as to give dear Saar Gilbert what my uncle has left me, so that the Court may be free, and he may return to it. I desire you to let this be *entre nous* until it be completed past alteration, and even Mr. Oreburn shall be unable to refuse to inherit what shall be his own. You are so clever with the law that you will kindly accomplish this before he can leave for America, which he assured me last night he should shortly do. Doubtless the deeds are in this terrible cupboard, which has cost Elinor and you so much trouble.'

'Law is much slower than you fancy, Fay; but I will do my best to fulfil my promise. First of all, however, the will must be proved and the codicil invalidated. I fear, even, that you must be of age before you can give your fortune away.'

'I shall not be twenty-one for more than three years, and I wish this arranged at once,' cried Fay impetuously; 'but I am old enough to distinguish right from wrong! The mortgages are mine, and I renounce them for my friend and benefactor. Of what use the law if it delay justice? Must I wait three years to do what is lawful and right? And if I die'—she shuddered—'what then?'

'I suppose Septimus Hope would step into your shoes,' replied Maxwell, shrugging his shoulders.

'Make him my compliments, and assure him that I will strive to live. Must I wait until I am quite old—twenty-one—before I can renounce these riches and relieve Saar Gilbert?'

'I think so; but wait patiently, and watch affairs during the coming year.'

'A year! It is a life. Saar Gilbert will be old, Boykin gone, Elinor'— She paused, and fixed her eyes on Maxwell, but his were averted. Her tone changed. 'I shall visit Madame, *ma grand'-mère*, according to my agreement, and you will induce them to return to the Court—is it not? Then I shall restore to Saar Gilbert his own. I know he will refuse—so will Gilbert, who is prouder even than his father. But I will find the means. *Allons!* I fear I detain you, Monsieur Villy. You are, perhaps, in search of Saar Gilbert. But I count on you to fulfil your promise.'

Their eyes met at last, and there returned to each the recollection of that childish compact of years ago. Tears swelled in hers.

'Ah, we remember the past. It was silly—unmaidenly, as they say. But I was a little child—is it not, Monsieur Villy? And you—you were so kind to the poor, strayed, untutored foreigner.'

A sob succeeded these words, and in another moment she had left the room. She was met by Gilbert, who saw the tears, and would have stopped her, but she passed him hastily. He looked into the room she had left, and saw Maxwell. His father had just told him of his attachment to Elinor; he suppressed with difficulty an expression of indignation. Maxwell, who understood him at a glance, could not defend himself without betraying Fay. He stood his ground, nevertheless, and returned Gilbert's cold 'Good day' with an equally indifferent greeting, feeling sure that time must exculpate him, and might exonerate Fay.

'My father is waiting for you, Mr. Maxwell, and my sister,' said Gilbert coldly.

'I was going to them when Miss Arlington detained me on business,' replied Maxwell, emphasising the last word, as he left the office.

Gilbert, like the rest, had heard Elinor's love-story with astonishment and incredulity. He had left his father with the intention of acknowledging to Maxwell that he had misunderstood him, and he found him as has been described. Himself honest and honourable by nature, he detested duplicity, and he could not avoid believing that Maxwell was not straightforward. Only the previous evening he had half won Fay's confidence, and even flattered himself that she might not be so devoted to Maxwell as they all fancied; now he was at sea again. He loved her so well that he could not bear that she should suffer; and even while jealously angry, he longed to dry the tears he had seen, and comfort her, as he had done when her uncle died. 'But of what use?' he asked himself. 'I should never propose for a rich heiress, being penniless myself, neither should I care to win what another man has possessed. I will leave England, and forget her.'

His reverie was interrupted by Tom, who came in search of Sir Gilbert, and announced Mr. Moneypenny. This was that gentleman's first visit, so Gilbert made himself as pleasant as he could till his father arrived, and then remained to listen. Mr. Moneypenny was a man of few words, and when he had anything to say, said it shortly; so, when he had returned Sir Gilbert's courteous greeting, he entered upon his subject.

'My nephew tells me, Sir Gilbert, that he is engaged to your daughter. Does this meet your approval?' he began.

'Are they really engaged?' asked Sir Gilbert. 'My daughter is so enigmatical that I scarcely read her yet. The last words I had the pleasure of hearing from her lips, as addressed to your nephew, were: "I can never leave papa."'

Then he has told me a lie,' said the testy Moneypenny.

'I think not, but young people are wearisomely incomprehensible. Pardon, Gilbert, I exclude you. I confess that you are—may I say it?—sometimes wearisomely comprehensible.'

'So much the better,' said the Moneypenny; 'but, Sir Gilbert, my nephew tells me he has asked your consent.'

'He has done me that honour.'

'And you, Sir Gilbert?'

'Well, I followed the fashion adopted by proper parents, and referred him to my daughter, who refers him to me, until he, poor fellow, has rounded into a sort of football between us.'

'Am I to understand that you will give your consent, Sir Gilbert?'

'Certainly, it is all I have to give, for this place is already hers. And I like your nephew; I shall be proud of so clever and distinguished a son-in-law. How that word elevates one to the shelf!'

'Thank you, Sir Gilbert; it is well to deal with a gentleman,' exclaimed Mr. Moneypenny.

'I am glad you allow me this slight distinction—I have lost all other,' said Sir Gilbert.

'The gentleman who never forgets himself never loses his distinction,' said Mr. Moneypenny warmly. 'I have misunderstood you, Sir Gilbert, as well as my nephew. He offended me because I thought he was truckling to rank. Now I see which way the wind blew.'

'How fortunate you are! The points of the compass are my daily difficulty. When I think they are at balmy west, they are sure to be rheumatic east. Gilbert is ever my weathercock.'

'Then you have one you may well be proud of. I trust you are as favourable to the match as your father, Mr. Oreburn?'

Mr. Moneypenny looked at Gilbert, who had not made up his mind.

He turned off the question by remarking that they had not yet heard Mr. Moneypenny's opinion, upon which Sir Gilbert ejaculated, 'Most diplomatic of sons!'

'My opinion is soon expressed. If my nephew is so fortunate as to marry Miss Oreburn, both I and my wife will rejoice. And, Sir Gilbert, I may as well say to you what I don't choose even to hint to him, for I like young men to work; the Castle and other property once belonging to your family will probably revert to him, but I never make promises. I should, however, settle some money on the young people.'

This last clause was pronounced in a whisper, as if the speaker feared eavesdroppers.

'Too generous! Expectations shower in upon us. I wish realities were as propitious,' said Sir Gilbert, smiling at his son. 'After all, Æsculapius will not possess our entirety.'

'We will keep all we can from him,' growled Mr. Moneypenny. 'We have the Cottage, Green Oaks Farm, and the mortgages, and we will have a try for the Manor. Between ourselves, Sir Gilbert, I thought my nephew was after Mademoiselle.'

'The wits of the neighbourhood seem to have jumped simultaneously,' said Sir Gilbert, glancing at his son, whose face darkened. 'By the way, where is the poor child? She has been quite melancholy since her uncle's death; and they were not devotedly affectionate in life either.'

Gilbert volunteered to search for Fay, and left his father and Mr. Moneypenny to conclude negotiations. But he did not find her. She was shut into her room, alone, and weeping out her incomprehensible grief on her little bed, her cat in her arms. In truth, she did not understand herself, or her surroundings; and so many events had been crowded into the last two months of her life, that she was bewildered. She scarcely believed in her own identity. She had gained one relative and lost another; she was raised from poverty to riches; she owned what was Sir Gilbert's, and could not restore it to him; and she hated herself for supplanting him. Then there was a change in Elinor and Maxwell's manner towards her, and Gilbert had hinted that now she was rich, she would doubtless have abundance of suitors—what did he mean?—why was he tender one moment and tart the next? And why did he use the word *fiancé*, as if he longed to expunge it from the vocabulary?

Fay had never had a headache in her life, never been seriously ill—now she felt as if her head were some machine, in which wheels were turning, turning, with strange velocity. As thought after thought arose, they seemed to whirl round with them, until she felt too giddy even to think. Visions of one and another of the actors in the late scenes appeared on the shifting stage of her mind, and troubled it sadly. She did not know that they were called up by excitement and sleeplessness, but she wished they were away. At last a calmer scene presented itself, and, thinking of Gilbert and the moonlight on the river, she fell asleep.

Gilbert had taken refuge with Aimée, who was always the one cool glade in the heated landscape of daily life. She had told him that she had long suspected Elinor's attachment for Maxwell, and she was not quite so sure as the rest that Fay's love for him was all absorbing. When Gilbert mentioned his late encounter with her and Maxwell, however, she imagined that Maxwell must have been announcing his engagement, and so caused the tears.

'She would not cry if she did not love him,' said Gilbert. 'And he must have given her cause to believe he returned it. I wish we were all like you, Aimée--beyond the burning tropics of this uncertainty, in the windy prairies of the West.'

'Oh, brother, you little know,' sighed Aimée, a shadow passing over her sweet face. 'But we may all find peace, if only we seek it where alone it may be found. Pray for it, and it will come.'

'I do, darling; but in this Old World it does not answer my prayers as in the New. I must leave it again. But will you not go and look for Fay? You who read us all know well enough that she has too much influence over me to let me find rest while she is unhappy.'

He walked off, whistling softly, as if to disperse the very words he had used, and Aimée went, with some difficulty—for she could scarcely walk unsupported—to Fay's room. She found her, as we left her, asleep. She sat down quietly by her side, and awaited her awakening, remembering how Fay had once watched the day and night through by her bedside, and praying silently that the peace which she had recommended to her brother might descend on her, and on the rest of the beloved household. We have already said that Aimée's life was a prayer, and as she asked for blessings on the dear ones around her, she did not forget to intercede for that one black sheep whom she had once believed white.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A LOVERS' QUARREL.

WHEN Elinor stole quietly to her bed that night, she felt like a culprit unjustly pardoned and crowned. As she stood over the sleeping Fay, watched her flushed face, and saw its expression change, even in slumber, she trembled at the effect the announcement of her engagement might have upon her.

While she stood gazing on her and her Villy, curled up on the counterpane, Fay awoke. Seeing Elinor, she started, and suddenly jumped out of bed, exclaiming,—

'What has happened, Elinor? I endure not suspense, and am already overwhelmed with the mysteries of life. I shall lose my reason—if, indeed, I possess any—unless I know the truth. Is it joy, or sorrow?'

'Joy for me, but'— replied Elinor, and paused.

'Your joy is ours, *chérie*. I pine for some one to be glad; we have been *triste* so long.'

As Fay said this she clasped her hands tightly and watched Elinor, whose eyes suddenly met hers.

'I see it in your face—the secret is revealed,' she continued, suppressing all emotion, if she felt any, but growing pale. 'My uncle's death has withdrawn the veil, and you know all. Monsieur Villy, *mon cher fiancé*, is now your *fiancé*, and loves you best. Let me felicitate you, *ma mie*.'

She put her arms round Elinor and held her in a long embrace. Elinor felt a repressed sob, but when she loosened her arms there was no visible distress. She could not understand her even now.

'Fay, darling, are you in earnest?' she said, tears rising to her eyes.

'Why not? I have been too long a child; I learn to be a woman,' she replied, with grave simplicity. 'How beautiful you look!—how different from me!—who am but passable, as Saar Gilbert says. But my heart is better than it has been, since we have made the peace, and I strive to be amiable as you and Aimée. You think that I succeed, is it not?'

She tried to smile, but tears came. She sat down on her little bed and covered her face. It was now Elinor's turn to kneel at her side, and whisper words of love. Fay stooped to kiss her friend's brow, and let her tears fall on it.

'I have been wilful and bad to you, Elinor, and you have been ever an angel to me. Forgive me!' she sobbed.

'Forgive me also,' returned Elinor.

'Now we will say our prayers,' whispered Fay.

In a few minutes they were on their knees, side by side. No other word passed. Fay rose first, and again kissing Elinor's forehead, returned to bed. She took her cat in her arms, and when Elinor next looked at her, she either was, or pretended to be, asleep.

But it was long before either of them really slept. Elinor lay awake, wondering still what Fay's feelings were, and Fay fell into a dreamy dose, wondering also.

No sooner did the birds begin their early twitter, than Fay was up again. She was too restless to lie still, so she dressed herself noiselessly. She crept towards Elinor's bed, and saw that she was sleeping. She thought she had never seen her look so calmly happy, and a jealous shade passed over her face. Then she left the room, followed by Villy. She went into the drawing-room, and, opening the window, was instantly in the garden. Thence she passed through the side gate into the dew-spangled orchard, and on to the meadow. She was soon absorbed in the glory of the sunrise. Slowly, grandly, the majestic day-king rose above the distant Malvern Hills, and gazed down upon the Wye. The river received his golden shower, and rippled into smiles. Every sedge and willow along its banks, every flower and grass-blade in the fields, every tree-leaf in the woods, sparkled with the beams he darted into the dew-drops. The phantom mists rolled away, and revealed the sky and the distant reaches of the river. The birds awoke by 'twos and threes' to renewed life and song, while the cattle rose from their beds to the joy of a fresh day.

Fay rejoiced with them. She stood entranced, forgetting all but the scene before her, and marvelling at the greatness and goodness of the Creator. The mists cleared from her mind as the fog from the river, and she broke into a hymn of praise.

While she and the birds were singing together, she felt a light touch on her shoulder, and, turning, was greeted by Gilbert. He had not slept much that night, and having risen to undraw his curtains and let in the sunrise, had seen Fay beneath his window. He must needs be abroad with her.

'Hush!' she said, giving him one hand, and laying a finger of the other on her lips.

Was she conscious that he held her hand, as they stood a while silent, side by side?

She was herself the first to speak.

'Let us gather wild-roses and honeysuckle for Aimée with the dew on them,' she said, pointing to a hedgerow covered with a mass of flowers.

They went, hand-in-hand. They disturbed three sheep nestling in a dry corner by a hollow in an oak. Gilbert bade her remain there while he gathered her flowers. She was about to resist, but, pointing to the wet grass, he insisted, and she obeyed. He returned with branches of half-opened roses and honeysuckles, tipped with dew.

She was soon busy wreathing her hat with flowers, and the thought that had haunted him all night returned. Did she know of this engagement? He would find out, if possible.

'You were ill last night,' he began. 'You had a fearful headache, Aimée said. I fear your interview with Mr. Maxwell sent you to bed, for you did not reappear after I met you in the passage.'

'I was speaking to Monsieur Villy of my affairs, and begging him to hasten our return to the Court,' she said, as she pricked her finger with a thorn. 'You see how your roses wound!'

She threw the spray from her, and Gilbert picked it up.

'I would rather heal than wound; but you always misunderstand me,' he said. 'You do not perhaps know that your Monsieur Villy, for whom your picture was painted'— He paused, feeling that he was already losing temper.

'He is no longer *my* Monsieur Villy, so pray avoid the term. I am apprised of his engagement to Elinor, and renounce him for ever as my *fiancé*. You have already much annoyed me, Gilbert, by reflecting on my conduct both in England and France, as well as on Monsieur—I mean Mr. Maxwell's. You now understand the true state of his mind, and—of Elinor's.'

'I understand that they are engaged, and I hope Elinor is not deceived.'

'I see not in what he can have deceived her. Is it not enough that he loves her, and has said so? If you think of his—his—interest in me, and his kindness since I was a little child—and if you are so suspicious, sir, as to consider that he has ever said such words to me—as—as to give me to suppose he cared for me but as a friend, you wrong him greatly. I have seen and heard how every one has misconstrued his conduct, while he loved only Elinor, and I have not been blameless. But he was ever good to me, and I shall never—never forget it.'

'He is scarcely worth discussion,' said Gilbert carelessly. 'I wonder what Elinor sees in him. But ladies are enigmas. What a glorious morning it is! I am detaining you, Mademoiselle. You were bound on some expedition.'

'I came to see the sunrise, and to be cool once more. The night has been fearfully hot,' said Fay, restraining rising tears with difficulty.

'Quite equinoctial,' rejoined Gilbert.

Fay put on the rose-weathed hat, and prepared to return to the house. Gilbert picked up the trailing branches he had gathered, which she had forsaken in her haste, and accompanied her, saying hotly that she had soon forgotten Aimée's flowers. They walked through the meadow in silence, side by side. The glory of the early morning still surrounded them, but it was dimmed to their imaginations. Gilbert was accusing himself and Fay of he scarcely knew what, mentally calling himself a jealous fool and her a coquette; while she, awakening to this new-born sense of womanhood, was resolving never again to show affection to mankind. A strange shame of her childish tokens of devotion to Maxwell arose, and her colour deepened to crimson as she recalled Elinor's doubts and Gilbert's suspicions. In that slow, silent walk through the meadow and the orchard, swift thoughts were succeeded by rapid decision. She would be cold as an iceberg to Maxwell, distant as the north pole to Gilbert, haughty as a pine-top to every other man except Sir Gilbert, who should have the picture Aimée had so artistically painted.

Having attained this climax as they reached the little lawn, she turned her now flashing eyes on her companion, and said, with a sort of proud composure,—

'Perhaps Monsieur will now give me the flowers for Aimeé. I shall arrange them before she descends.'

He gave them to her carelessly, and stood to watch the black-robed, rose-crowned figure disappear ; then, his head proudly erect, and his step firm, went to seek the young men, his father's tenants, who proposed to join him in his second quest after fortune.

CHAPTER LXIV.

WAR TO THE DEATH.

'I THINK Dawdling Dyce will console himself with Miss Maxwell,' said Sir Gilbert to Aimée, as they were discussing a dinner given by the Moneypennys the previous day. 'She is recovering her spirits, and he is relinquishing the unattainable. She made some sprightly advances to Gilbert, but he might be the Shah of Persia, he is so magnificent. You should have seen him sublimely contemplating Fay at a distance, while she, the observed of all observers, was holding her court. But I don't like her manner. She has assumed a sort of proud reserve, unnatural, if in a way becoming, and when she forgets herself for a moment, and returns to the sparkling child, she suddenly resumes her dignity with the comic resolution of years. How unfortunate this secret rivalry with Elinor is ! I shall be thankful when the marriage is over, for even Elinor weakens under Cupid's wounds.'

'But then we shall lose Boykin,' sighed Aimée. 'He has only consented to stay at Elinor's entreaty till we are back at the Court and the wedding has taken place. You will be happier, dear father, when we are at home again.'

'Scarcely. I shall be a thrall to Fay and Dr. Hope, instead of the defunct General. It is only another delay. We have changed masters, and all that Gilbert's magnanimity has brought about, is the discovery of Fay's parentage, his own unhappiness, and a lengthening lawsuit. But we are ordered to enjoy our own again while we may, and be thankful. I wish I were that ecstatic and "cumberless bird of the wilderness." By the way, our hostess was "cumbered" last night with a wearisome weight of jewelry, and our host with the ill-veiled desire to elevate his future niece-in-law to an imaginary throne. He is truly refreshing; for he takes no pains to conceal his merchant-princedom, and his admiration of Elinor's aristocratic gifts. You should have seen her also, with her *cavaliere servente* at her side. Happiness is not the word; modest ecstasy might do. Still, she wore her honours meekly, and Maxwell is a new man. I really think I am getting proud of my future son-in-law. Ah! Here comes my Baronet. What is the last event?'

'Mr. Hope Arlington wishes to see you, sir,' said Tom, entering the room.

'Who on earth is he?'

'Dr. Hope that was, please, sir.'

'Truly I forgot. Show him in. I suppose our mutual affairs move him.'

'Will you go to him instead?' asked Aimée, turning pale.

'Say I will come,' said Sir Gilbert, and went.

Mr. Hope Arlington, as we must now call Dr. Hope, was self-possessed as ever. Sir Gilbert and he had not met since the General's death, and he was rather doubtful of his reception; but Sir Gilbert set him at his ease.

'So you and Miss Arlington now hold the reigns of my slow-footed fate between you!' he began, after a careless greeting. 'I am still in abeyance like yesterday's debate, while you all go into committee on the bill. I had flattered myself that the Arlington dynasty was at an end, and I find it still has successors. It is, however, a sufficiently mellifluous name.'

'I assure you it has become mine quite innocently,' said Mr. Hope Arlington blandly, 'and I desire nothing so much as an amicable arrangement of affairs. There are complications which will doubtless be settled. How is Miss Aimée?'

'Tolerably well,' replied Sir Gilbert, surprised at the sudden transition.

'It was of her and not of the affairs I came to speak,' said Mr. Hope Arlington, twirling the hat he held almost nervously.

'Ah! we remember your kind skill and care with gratitude. But you have "thrown medicine to the dogs," and we must no longer count on your aid.'

'All that I can offer is at your daughter's disposal, for our joint lives,' said Mr. Hope Arlington, glancing inquiringly at Sir Gilbert.

'Ah! too great a devotion. She scarcely expects so much,' observed Sir Gilbert, professing, at least, to misunderstand him.

'She is quite prepared for it. Indeed, I have presumed to come to you to ask your sanction to my proposing that she should be under my care for—for life,' said Mr. Hope Arlington, hesitating.

'She may not always be so unfortunate as to require medical aid,' replied Sir Gilbert, a slight frown passing over his face. 'And under my present circumstances, we may think it advisable to try again the retrenching system abroad, since it fails at home.'

'Do not misunderstand me, Sir Gilbert; for I am in earnest, if you are not. I have loved your daughter Aimée ever since I have known her, and being now in a position to propose for her, I ask your consent to do so. I do not think she is indifferent to me,—indeed, I know she is not,—and if you further my views, she would consent. The Manor is mine; the mortgages, the lawyers say, are also mine; but you might be free of them and continue at the Court, if you pleased. Indeed, with Aimée as my wife, you would command and I obey.'

'Slightly Machiavellian; but I will ask her,' said Sir Gilbert haughtily. 'I understand the General bartered clumsily for my eldest daughter, but made no exchange. I did not expect a similar attempt on my youngest.'

Before Mr. Hope Arlington could make the protest on his lips, Sir Gilbert was gone.

He found Aimée still alone, very pale and calm. He sat down by her side.

'My darling, I have another neuralgic attack,' he began, covering some agitation by his usual easy sarcasm. 'They call every nervous pain neuralgia, do they not? We will ask your amiable doctor, who, having caused, may cure it. Does my Aimée know that he follows in Maxwell's steps, and desires to deprive me of another treasure?'

A pain so intense came into Aimée's face that her father was alarmed. He hastened to reassure her.

'I am not angry, my darling. I come only as ambassador. Mr. Hope Arlington does me the honour of proposing for you to me, and I would merely know if you are aware of this.'

Aimée put one hand over her eyes, but made no reply. Sir Gilbert took the other.

'Has my Aimée also been learning to love beneath my obtuse sight?' he inquired sadly.

Still no answer.

'Must I lose both my daughters?'

A whispered 'No, papa.'

'Aimée, be candid with me. Whatever my own feelings on this matter, I would sacrifice them for your sake. I have nothing earthly to desire but my children's happiness; and for the heavenly, my prayer is, to be united with them and their mother in God's eternal kingdom.'

'This is also my prayer, dearest father,' breathed Aimée; but her voice was so low that Sir Gilbert bent to hear it.

'But does my Aimée love this insinuating doctor and heir? If so'—

'I shall never, never marry, dear papa.'

'So said Elinor; but I trust she will soon be a happy wife.'

'Then you and I will be everything to one another; for Fay will also marry.'

'I do not understand, my darling. What must I say to this pretender for your hand? Will you not see him?'

'No, I cannot. I will not. Tell him that I have resolved never to marry.'

'If your unlucky father were not in your path, would the answer be different?'

'No; were I quite alone in the world, I would not marry him.'

'I think he loves you. He seems sincere. He will think I influence you if you do not see him; and, indeed, he has been a patient friend and kind physician.'

'He has—he has! There is my distress. But we had better never meet again. Tell him I am grateful, but that I decline his offer now and ever. He will understand me. Go, dear father.'

Aimée's manner was so unnaturally excited that Sir Gilbert thought it best to obey. He paused on the threshold of the dining-room to reflect a moment. He was thankful for the message he bore, but he feared that Aimée's affection had in some strange way been gained.

He found Mr. Hope Arlington restlessly pacing the room. He had been in mortal anxiety during Sir Gilbert's absence, for was not Aimée the one being he loved? He looked at Sir Gilbert, but had not courage to ask the question. He read his answer in Sir Gilbert's face.

'By heaven, she loves me! Let me see her!'

'I do not know what may have passed between you and my daughter, but I trust and believe in her more entirely than in myself. She says she will never marry, that she is grateful, but declines your offer now and ever. I am sorry for you—for, loving Aimée, I feel you can never love again.'

Many changes of mind and countenance came to Mr. Hope Arlington during this brief speech; but the last betrayed the man. He swore an oath that he would never give her up, and that he knew she loved him; then, recovering himself, said, with a sardonic smile, that it might be better for all parties to be friends than foes. Then he abruptly left the room.

'Peace before all; but where is she to be found?' sighed Sir Gilbert following him to the door, where a groom was holding two magnificent horses. 'Good morning. That horse is worthy of Napoleon. I mean of your brother—not him of the Bucephalus,' said Sir Gilbert.

Mr. Hope Arlington galloped furiously to the Manor, and Sir Gilbert returned to Aimée. He found her in tears.

'Aimée, it is not yet too late,' said the perplexed father.

'Quite too late, dear papa,' replied Aimée. 'I have been making up my mind to tell you my one, only secret.'

Again Sir Gilbert sat down by her, and she confided to him, with many interruptions, the story of Lizzie Maxwell and herself. When the tale was told, she covered her face, and sobbed as if for shame. Sir Gilbert put his arm round her, and, controlling his indignation, said tenderly,—

'And my darling was on the eve of loving this man, but was saved from such degradation by the courage of another. Let us be thankful for so merciful an escape.'

'He sinned. He has been punished. Let us forgive him,' said Aimée.

'There are others who would wear my Aimée's love more honourably and worthily,' hazarded Sir Gilbert.

'Then it shall be my father, who is all honour and worth,' returned Aimée half-playfully, turning her sweet eyes on Sir Gilbert. 'We will live for one another and for God.'

'Be it so, my love. How like to your mother you are!'

And thus the paternal and filial contract was sealed.

CHAPTER LXV.

A WEDDING.

Sir Gilbert sauntered back to the Court, much as he had sauntered down to the Cottage, and his family returned as quietly as they left. But when the change of abode was made public, the Ashton bells rang merrily, and the Ashton drum and fife band played vigorously, tenants and labourers came to congratulate, and Sir Gilbert was glad to be at home again. So was Fay, who spent most of her time in her beloved woods, courting solitude rather than her natural element—society.

Maxwell, with lover-like zeal, pleaded for an early marriage. He wanted to be settled in town—above all, he wanted Elinor. She, still clinging most to her father, tried to delay, but Gilbert brought her to decision. He said that he must be in America by October, and those who knew him were sure that he meant what he said. So the marriage was settled for September.

On a fresh, fair September morning, Elinor prepared serenely for her bridal. Autumn awoke with warmth and sunshine, and dried the wood-paths with their leaf-garb, so the walk to church, so anxiously planned, was possible. It was Elinor's desire thus to go with her father, who yielded to her innocent wish gladly; for, like her, he had a distaste to 'the pomp of circumstance.'

Accordingly, they headed the little procession that left the Court that delicious morn. Elinor was, as beseemed the occasion, in spotless white, and over the light wreathed bonnet was thrown the bridal veil. Her three bridesmaids, Aimée, Fay, and Miss Maxwell, also wore the usual symbolic garb, with a touch of rose-colour to distinguish them from the bride. Mantles of rose-colour were added to shield them from the slight cold of the morning. Gilbert walked with Miss Maxwell, and Fay by the side of Aimée's pony-chair.

As they entered the woods, Sir Gilbert held his daughter's hand; but neither of them spoke much. They were far dearer to one another at that moment than ever, although they were to part for another's sake, and Elinor wondered, even then, how she could leave her father's side for that other's; yet she loved him well.

'Do you remember our first Sunday morning walk through these woods?' asked Sir Gilbert.

'Yes, dear father. How much has happened since!' replied Elinor.

'Much indeed,' said Sir Gilbert, glancing behind him.

Gilbert and Lizzie seemed almost as silent as they; but the woods echoed to Fay's merriment. She danced along by Aimée's side, making marvellous jests with unnatural hilarity, while Gilbert listened and wondered at her sudden change.

'She has donned her gaiety with that becoming cloak,' thought Sir Gilbert.

The little party walked briskly on. It was a daintily arranged wedding. The path to the church was covered with a carpet of moss fringed with fern plants, amongst which trailed honeysuckle and wild clematis. Interminable arches of deftly-woven leaves, supported by pillars adorned with wreaths of ivy, mistletoe, and lichen, spanned the way; and flickering sunbeams gilded it. A choir of unseen choristers played the wedding-march, and the breezes performed the symphony.

Nature varies her decorations; so, when the woods were threaded, she had prepared a fresh carpet through gracefully-hung festoons. Leaves, tendrils, flowers of the elegantly garlanded hop, awaited the bride, and in their varied shades of green, caught and softened the sunshine. She walked through the leafy walls towards the distant spire, until she reached the lych-gate of the church.

Here began the triumph of art. The initials E. W., and the words 'God bless them,' in white camellias on a moss-ground, surmounted the gate; while garlands of evergreens and flowers were interwoven with the woodwork. It was so artistic that Sir Gilbert stayed Elinor to admire; but she hastened through a crowd of villagers and her school-children towards the church door. She scarcely knew that the children, in white frocks and pink tippets, scattered flowers as she passed; or that the church was equally flower-wreathed. The perfume of stephanotis, geranium, myrtle, rose, blended as she approached the altar, which was delicately garlanded with myrtle and white flowers. It was fairy-work.

The bridegroom and his friends had arrived, and the church was soon crowded with tenants and villagers. William and Elinor stood at the altar, the three bridesmaids at its base, the friends around, and the solemn service began. Mr. Tenderton read it simply and tenderly, and the vows were made clearly and without hesitation. Sir Gilbert and Elinor were marble pale when he gave her away, and great tears rolled down Fay's cheeks. Indeed, she suppressed a sob. Once more Gilbert's light, imperceptible, protective touch was on her shoulder. She had not known he was standing at her side. A smile overspread her face, as she listened in hushed eagerness to the solemn service.

William Maxwell and Elinor Oreburn were made one, for all time, and, they hoped, for all eternity. How fair, graceful, and modest she looked as she turned towards him, now her husband, and then to her father. It would be hard to say which loved her best. Fay was watching them with her eager, tearful eyes, and Gilbert was watching her. There was also another watcher in that assembly, more eager than they. Hope Arlington was amongst the crowd, and his eyes were bent on Aimée. He had been sheltering behind a pillar; but when the ceremony was over, stretched forward to catch a last sight of her. She looked up and saw him. She had hitherto kept calm with effort; now she uttered a little cry. Lizzie Maxwell started from a dream of her own broken vows, and also perceived him and his passionate gaze on Aimée. The action was momentary, but the effect enduring. Gilbert put his arm round Aimée, and supported her to the vestry, and Lizzie stepped a pace forwards in order to attract the attention of her late lover. She succeeded, and gave him such a look as should, if possible, obliterate Aimée's. He turned hastily and left the church.

'Leave me a moment, and I shall be well,' whispered Aimée, when Gilbert placed her on a seat.

He obeyed, and, with the customary action of pressing her hand, first on her heart, then over her eyes, she prayed for strength. She did not know that Lizzie was near, watching her angrily, yet resolving to tear the last thought of the past from her memory.

While William and Elinor, proud and happy, were signing the register of their marriage, Fay broke down. Her sobs drew Elinor to her at once, with her gentle 'Don't, darling, for my sake.'

'I won't—I won't; but I am so wicked, and so, so miserable!' sobbed Fay, throwing her arms round Elinor. 'A wedding is more *triste* than a funeral.'

'Do not use such ominous commonplaces, Fay,' said Sir Gilbert. 'Tears are *de rigueur* on these festive occasions, but not dirges. We are about to sing our epithalamium. Besides, your signature is awaited, and the register is shivering to return to its chest.'

'*Ma foi*, I will be once more gay, Saar Gilbert. Elinor, I felicitate you. Monsieur Villy, where are you? I wish you also joy, for ever. How lovely you look, *ma mie!*—and you, even, are quite handsome, Monsieur Villy. Is it always thus when we are married?'

'She does look lovely, Mam'selle,' broke in Mrs. Moneypenny, protruding an enormous bouquet and a gorgeously-adorned person. 'No wonder Sir Gilbert is proud of her.'

'The Vicar is waiting for the signatures,' whispered Mrs. Tenderton, also marvellously smart for the occasion.

'Must I sign? I write so ill,' said Fay, when her turn came. 'The register will be ashamed of my *griffonage*, good Mr. Tenderton. So! Félicité Gabrielle de'—

'Arlington,' whispered Gilbert—'you must put it.'

'I like not the name, but there it is,' cried Fay, making an illegible scratch, and glancing up at Gilbert.

'I hope the legality of the marriage will not depend on that,' said Sir Gilbert.

'What do you think of our decorations?' asked Mrs. Tenderton, as they prepared to leave the vestry. 'Look well at them, and guess the decorator.'

As William led Elinor down the church, and the rest followed, they glanced from side to side. Even she admired the tasteful wreaths, and he, pressing her arm tenderly, said they were indeed beautiful, and worthy of her. The bells pealed, the children threw more flowers, and the crowd shouted, as they proceeded to the gate.

Mr. Moneypenny's carriage and four prancing greys were awaiting them. He and his wife had made a point of this. They thought a marriage no marriage without such accessories, and, having yielded to the walk to church, insisted on the drive home. They and Mrs. Tenderton followed in another carriage and pair, the rest returned as they came.

While Sir Gilbert helped Aimée into her pony-chair, and the others were admiring the monogram and wreathing of the lych-gate, a little girl brought Aimée some flowers.

'This is for our bridal, dearest father,' she said, smiling through irrepressible tears.

'*Soit*,' replied Sir Gilbert sadly. 'But we shall miss her.'

It was a group for a painter. The old beflowered gateway, the impatient pony, the three bridesmaids, the father and son, the school-children, the villagers, the servants, vanishing rapidly through the hop-garden, and the ancient church.

'I have guessed the decorator,' said Gilbert, looking at Fay. 'This is your handiwork.'

'Not so wise, Monsieur,' she said, colouring.

'Have you little ones done all this?' asked Sir Gilbert of the children who were crowding round.

'No, sir; it was Ma'mselle, please, sir. We only helped, and fetched the flowers from the Castle and everywhere, please, sir; and gathered the evergreens, and helped make our frocks.'

'And you are all going to have a good tea? and, thanks to our benefactor, Mr. Moneypenny, the old folk a good dinner?'

'Yes, please, sir,' answered the delighted children.

'Then we must be thankful for our wedding, and for our Fay,' said Sir Gilbert, glancing affectionately at the impressionable young creature whose face wore again its native brightness.

'I am proud of my success, and must have my reward,' she cried. 'May I walk home with you, as Elinor walked here? You must be now my *fiancé*.'

'I am between two *fiancés*,' remarked Sir Gilbert, putting his hand on Aimée's chair, and leading the way homewards.

They reached the Court simultaneously with the carriages, for the drive was long. The servants were assembled awaiting the bride, and amongst them Stokes was conspicuous in a new silk gown, and cap adorned with white, Elinor's presents. Fay pointed her out to Gilbert, and said, with her old *espièglerie*, 'Behold our *belle-dame*!'

At Elinor's request, the breakfast was as simple as the wedding. None but relations were invited, save the Vicar and his wife.

'You will have elegance combined with economy,' laughed Sir Gilbert, as Maxwell took his seat by Elinor. 'She would not add the last hair to the back of our indebtedness, so we have provided a frugal repast and an odd number.'

'Not so, Saar Gilbert,' cried Fay; 'the *déjeûner* is perfect, prepared by the princess of cooks; the cake is from London, and adorned like a fairy ballroom, and the guests are even, for I bring with me my *partenaire*—see! my Villy, who will comport himself angelically. Mr. Oreburn himself shall not behave better.'

Fay placed her cat on a chair by her side. He had a white ribbon round his neck, and a wedding favour beneath his ear. He mewed vigorously.

'Now we are the round dozen—Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell, Mr. and Mrs. Moneypenny, Mr. and Mrs. Tenderton, Saar Gilbert and Aimée, Mr. Oreburn and Miss Maxwell, *mon Villy et moi*.'

Fay seated herself with her cat on one side, and either intentionally or unintentionally, Gilbert took the other, dividing her and Lizzie. Fay looked grave again. She had resolved to 'keep at the distance' all the young men, especially Gilbert, and now he was close to her. Still, they should not think she was pining for Maxwell, so she soon recovered her gaiety. Gilbert followed her example, and the breakfast proceeded.

'Fay must cut the cake; she is the youngest bridesmaid,' said Elinor quietly, made happy at last in seeing Fay and Gilbert happy.

'And Gilbert must help her, for he is our only bachelor,' said Sir Gilbert.

The cake was cut between them.

'I am very awkward, for although I have attended weddings in America, I had never this honour,' said Gilbert, taking the knife from Fay when she had made the first incision.

'And for me, I have never been at one before. I begin to think them delightful,' replied Fay naïvely.

'Perhaps you will have been at your own before I return,' said jealous Gilbert.

'*Ma foi*, *non.* I shall never marry—I prefer my liberty,' rejoined Fay, blushing scarlet. 'Ah, Gilbert! you destroy the "halmond hicing," which Stokes "can't take her heyes off."'

Mr. Tenderton proposed the health of the bride and bridegroom in words so true and tender that they drew tears from the eyes of most of the little party. Elinor hid her face for very shame at the praise he bestowed on her; but when Maxwell burst forth with forensic eloquence in returning thanks, she could but look up at him admiringly. He certainly had words at will, and those who knew him as rather silent than talkative wondered whence they came. Sir Gilbert took up his eyeglass, Mr. Moneypenny nodded approvingly, said 'Bravo!' and knocked the table; Mr. Tenderton smiled, the ladies laughed and cried by turns, and even Gilbert condescended to think that, after all, Maxwell was a clever fellow, and, there could be no doubt, desperately in love with Elinor.

'Monsieur Villy, why did you not put on your wig? we then should have imagined you on the woolsack,' asked Fay.

'If he defends your cause as eloquently as he has inaugurated his own and Elinor's, we shall have both our Manor and mortgages,' said Sir Gilbert.

'A very pretty speech indeed,' remarked Mr. Moneypenny dryly.

'It was beautiful; I knew he was a genius,' said his wife, wiping her eyes, and Maxwell sat down in some confusion.

Gilbert was in no complimentary mood, so his speech was short. He stumbled slightly over his hopes that the bridesmaids would soon follow his sister's good example, and addressed himself principally to Aimée. But Sir Gilbert made up for his deficiencies; his serio-comic manner was irresistible, and, when he glanced round, and said that, since so many conflicting chemicals were fused in the crucible of that table, he trusted that the matrimonial chemicals might also blend happily, everybody laughed, though Mrs. Tenderton and Mrs. Moneypenny asked one another what he meant. Mr. Moneypenny enlightened them. He hoped in his speech that the old-fashioned chemicals, as Sir Gilbert chose to call their quarrels, would be done away with, and the new discoveries of friendship and relationship succeed them.

'All the gentlemen have spoken but one,' said Fay, standing Villy on his hind legs, and putting his front paws on the table.

Villy mewed.

'I understand him, therefore interpret his speech. Now, Villy, emulate your namesake. He says, "I beg to return thanks for the kindness of all these my friends to me and my mistress, ever since we were cast upon their bounty, and to assure them that we are not ungrateful. We wish Monsieur Villy and Elinor every good gift, and hope they will live happily all their lives."'

When Fay had spoken these simple words, she bent over her cat, and Gilbert saw that tears moistened his black coat.

'Fay, dear child!' he said, bending also.

She glanced up at him, and he never forgot those haunting, glistening, grateful eyes.

Soon after this the four greys were again at the door. Horses and servants were adorned with wedding favours, and Mrs. Moneypenny was content. All the household was assembled in the hall when Elinor came down, equipped in soft grey and pink. She had been crying, as was natural. All the ladies cried when she kissed them. Her husband and father both came to her, and, glancing from one to the other, she put a hand in the arm of each, and they led her between them to the carriage.

'God bless you both!' said Sir Gilbert, receiving the last kiss, and consigning his child to him who was to be to her henceforth closer than a father.

'I have the shoe in my pocket,' cried Fay, who was standing, flushed and excited, on the steps, with Gilbert at her side. 'Indeed, I have two. You must throw one, *mon ami*.'

So two white slippers followed the retreating carriage.

'They are two white magpies, and are "for mirth,"' she shouted; and Gilbert recalled the scene on the river.

CHAPTER LXVI.

BACK TO AMERICA.

As the period fixed for Gilbert's departure approached, Fay grew sad and reserved again; while he was ever striving to conquer his love for her, and failing. It was arranged that Sir Gilbert should accompany him to London, see him off for America, and pay a visit to Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell, who were to return from their short honeymoon about that time. They were to live at Kensington. Love having triumphed, Law began again, and Fay's affairs awaited their arrival in London. Mr. Hope Arlington fulfilled his intention of disputing everything, and the world surmised that Law would swallow a large oyster between him and Fay. Maxwell resolved to spare neither time nor money to defend his client, and advised Sir Gilbert and his son to keep the mortgages in abeyance until she came of age. Mr. Oreburn was for selling and paying them off at once, but he was overruled by the conviction that he would not know to whom to pay until the cause was tried and settled. It was hard for a man of resolution to leave England again without having accomplished that for which he had sought her; but he could not help himself. He was complaining of this the day before he left, in the presence of Aimée and Fay, when the latter said suddenly,—

'Then why do you go away?'

'To work harder than ever, increase my lands and gold, and make a home for my father and Aimée, when the Court shall belong to another,' he replied.

'That will never be,' she said decidedly. 'If the odious lawyers—I beg Monsieur Villy's pardon—if the gentlemen of the wig and gown declare in my favour, I shall not take the money.'

'You must.'

'When I am of age no one will dare to say *must* to me, sir. Even Saar Gilbert has never said it. How different you are!'

'In what?'

'In all. He is yielding, you are resolute; he is humble, you are proud; he is gentle, you are imperious; he is kind, you are cruel.'

'Thank you. I am sorry the little girl I picked up in the snowstorm should have formed so unfavourable an opinion of me after nearly twelve months' intercourse. I trust absence may modify it.'

'She does not mean it, Gilbert,' said Aimée. 'You never understand her. Indeed, you misunderstand one another.'

'On the contrary, I understand him perfectly,' rejoined Fay. 'He tells me that I am coquettish, a flirt, and altogether unlovely. I also regret that twelve months' acquaintance should have given him so disagreeable an impression. I trust that I may improve. I will do my possible during the coming three years. I think I have been more reserved of late, and by the time I am twenty-one I may be perfect.'

Their eyes met, and hers flashed indignantly.

'I do not know what we shall do without him,' sighed Aimée. 'The house is desolate enough as it is, bereft of Elinor.'

'Even you think not of me! When I am with the *grand'mère*, who writes in despair at my delay, perhaps you will miss me a very little.'

'Dear Fay, how changed you are!' sighed Aimée.

'I am glad. That is what I should be; is it not, Mr. Oreburn?'

'Change is always good if it is for the better, but'—replied Gilbert evasively, then paused, and suddenly altered his manner and the topic. 'Did Maxwell carry off that portrait you drew, Aimée? He will be able to judge of this projected alteration.'

'Fay desired me not to give it to him. Indeed, he did not ask for it,' replied Aimée.

No more was said, but Fay's flushed face and Gilbert's haughty head betrayed more to her than they did to them.

That last evening was very sad, the more so for Fay's unnatural efforts at gaiety. Gilbert asked her to sing, but she said that her music had departed with Elinor.

'But I am to have lessons of all the signors in London when I go to see Elinor, and shall return accomplished,' she added. 'If you will come back by my twenty-first birthday, I will sing all Mozart to you.'

'*La ci darem la mano?*' asked Sir Gilbert playfully.

'Ah! but that is a duet, Saar Gilbert.'

'Then our bushranger shall sing it with you. Promise to return for our coming of age, Gilbert?'

'I will try, if Fay will sing *Comme à vingt ans*.'

'Promise! promise! and I will sing for ever!' cried Fay.

'I promise, God willing,' said Gilbert.

Fay sang *Comme à vingt ans* and several of Gounod's songs charmingly, and there was a lull in their strife.

After breakfast the following morning, when the time of separation drew near, Fay disappeared. Gilbert went in search of her, that he might take leave of her. He dreaded it; but he could not go without it. He found Aimée's room empty, but, through the half-open door, which communicated with Fay's, he heard sobs. He could not resist glancing into the apartment. Fay was on her knees before her photograph-table, her head on her folded arms. Was she sobbing thus piteously because he was going away?

'Fay!' he said gently, retreating a few paces.

No response.

'Fay—dear Fay!' he repeated.

She came slowly, her head drooping.

'I cannot say good-bye,' she sobbed.

'Are you then sorry to part?'

'Sorry! Oh, Gilbert, it is like death!'

He took her hand.

'I did not think you cared for me so much. Oh, Fay, my darling!'

She looked up, her eyes brimming with tears.

'You will keep your promise? You will come back? When—when I am of age?'

'Yes, if you will give me that portrait you refused *him*.'

She went to Aimée's portfolio, took it out, and gave it. She could not speak for sobs.

'You did not love him, then? Oh, say you did not!'

'It is all a dream; I cannot tell,' she sobbed, and gave him a glance so appealing that it reached his heart.

The picture dropped. He put his arms gently round her, held her a while, then kissed her tenderly.

'God bless you!' he said, releasing her, and, snatching up the portrait, hurried from the room.

He paused on the threshold and glanced back. She was standing immovable; her hands clasped, her lips parted, her eyes strained after him. She tried to speak, and failed. He was gone.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE LAWSUIT.

We will now take the novelist's licence and skip over three years—the longest, slowest years of Fay's life, if the most eventful. She is of age at last, and on her twenty-first birthday awakes to a strange sense of responsibility. She has, for the second time, arisen with the sun, after a restless night. She congratulates herself on having been born in October, month of apple-picking, cider-making, and hardy plants. As she stands at her window to greet the chill morning air, she looks out on a grove of arbutus and laurustinus, the gnarled, quaintly-shaped branches and blossoms of which intertwine. One tree of laurustinus recalls the spring, for it is a mass of white flowers thick as hawthorn. She looks anxiously above the grove at the yellowing oaks and reddening beeches, as yet unenlivened by sunbeams, and trembles lest the mist should fall in rain. She sits down on her cushioned window-seat to watch and think. Careless of cold as the evergreens, she forgets that she has nothing about her but her dressing-gown and long black hair. Her cat is purring round her as she leans her arm on the window-sill, and a couple of bold robins are waiting for crumbs outside, only restrained from ingress by Villy's terrific form.

In the old days Fay was not given to deep thought, but of late she has learnt to think. She is now reviewing her life, and especially that portion of it encased in her memory of the last three years. Through the long vista, Gilbert's form stands out distinctly, his parting words and long embrace remain indelible. But he has not come; he has not even written for six long, weary months. Has she too learnt to love?

While she sits on, meditating, watching, resolving, we will glance back through these solemn three years, and give a brief sketch of their bearing on her.

In the early spring of the year following Gilbert's departure, Sir Gilbert took Fay and Aimée to London on a visit to Elinor. They were truly welcome guests. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell had a pleasant house in Kensington, whither resorted an agreeable society. They were as happy as their most sanguine friends could have wished; and nothing added so much to their happiness—if, indeed, perfection bears addition—as the pleasure Sir Gilbert felt in being with them.

It was so apparent, that the slight lingering doubt they entertained of his disapproval of their marriage vanished.

While Law dragged its 'weary length along,' Fay, the reputed heiress and undoubted belle, made her *début* in London, and Aimée shrank from much contact with the world. Elinor, in her young matronhood, was proud to *chaperon* Fay to places of amusement, and to introduce her and her sister to new friends at home. Acquaintances of lang syne thronged round Sir Gilbert, until he and his charming family became what is called 'a success.' Society opened its protecting arms to them, and they returned the embrace whensoever it pleased them. Maxwell's increasing reputation brought talent and literature to his doors, and the *débutantes* had their choice between rank and learning. But country air clung to them, and they declared they liked the Court best.

However, they were much admired, and had 'suitors suitable,' if the patent alliteration may be permitted. Fay's sparkling beauty and attractiveness drew them as bees to honey. In spite of her better resolutions, she coquetted and flirted according to Gilbert's dictum—that is to say, if Nature, *naïveté*, and *esprit* be coquetry and flirtation, she was guilty. Wherever she went she was courted and admired, and it was Sir Gilbert's good pleasure to recommend, in various terms, the numerous pretenders. 'Ah, Saar Gilbert, I like my liberty too well. See Elinor, how *she* is enslaved,' was her invariable reply.

Sir Gilbert took her from London to France, leaving Aimée with Elinor. All agreed that the long-delayed marriage had been most propitious, for it had enabled Sir Gilbert to resume early associations naturally. He was glad to revisit the old scenes, and to renew his acquaintance with the venerable Marquise. He even extracted a promise from her to visit London, as a witness of her grand-daughter's parentage, when the great trial came off. She gave it on condition that Fay should fetch her. Fay consented with an ill grace, and many side allusions to Sir Gilbert. Maxwell volunteered to escort them, which caused the Marquise some anxiety, as she felt guilty of incivility to him. Her frequent inquiries for Monsieur Oreburn were significant, but gave Sir Gilbert the opportunity of pressing on her the fact of the family poverty, and that most of his unstable possessions would be Fay's, if law decided in her favour.

Meanwhile, Gilbert wrote regularly and fully; but never to Fay. He sent her messages incomprehensible to her, but clear to every one else. 'Not even his love,' she would sigh in secret ; while the others knew that honour held his pen. He was making his way resolutely and perseveringly.

It was not until Fay's second London season that the cause of Arlington *versus* Arlington was decided. How the delays occurred, nobody knew—certainly not through Maxwell, for he worked well. But there were French witnesses to be hunted up, the credibility of each of whom was disputed. Every one knows the difficulty of proving an identity; and Mr. Hope Arlington's lawyers went so far as to question Fay's. The Aigrets of Paris swore through thick and thin on his side; so did their witnesses, bribed, it was supposed, by him, for he was much in France. As Fay had grown from child to woman since her father's death, it was hard to find people who had known them well enough to swear to her; and photographs are questionable evidence. The Marquise's clear and positive testimony went far to support Fay's, whose statements were unswerving—indeed, she fascinated judge, jury, and the public. It became a *cause célèbre*, and deserves more than this brief outline. But *causes célèbres* are not only tedious, but difficult to describe, and demand a chronicler well versed in law. Had Mr. Butterfield survived, he would have told the story in a dozen folio volumes.

Unfortunately for Fay, if happily for herself, Sister Mary had died of a fever caught from a poor man whom she had been nursing, and the 'missing link' of her evidence was wanting. They succeeded in securing the Douay innkeeper who had known Fay and her father, and who was the most respectable of the French witnesses. The others were mostly old *roués* or gamblers, declared by the opposite party to be bribed.

Even Sir Gilbert's evidence was questioned as interested. It was suggested that had he brought on the trial while General Arlington lived, he would have ruined himself by exasperating him; whereas his interest now would be to prove the girl who was indebted to him for protection, the rightful heir. Fay was so indignant at this, that Maxwell restrained her with difficulty from addressing judge and jury. Sir Gilbert, however, took it with his customary nonchalance, and caused much amusement by his sarcastic replies.

In an aside to Maxwell, however, he said, 'Remember that we sell the Court at once, and pay off this debt, whether due to Hope or Fay.'

'When she is of age,' replied his cautious son-in-law.

There was no doubt that the Manor was entailed on George Arlington and his children, if he had any; but the entail ceased with them, and the General had the power to will it. This fact had not been generally known until Maxwell brought it to light. Then arose the question of outlawry, the validity of a foreign marriage and Fay's legitimacy, and long and eager search had to be made for the certificate of her birth.

As regarded the sanity of the General when he wrote the codicil, the evidence of Mr. Tenderton, Stalker, and the most respectable of the servants, was well set against that of an interested physician and a few of the subalterns of the Manor; so that the issue of the trial hung at last on the certificate. Advertisements with offers of reward were circulated in the French papers, and letters sent to the French clergy. Maxwell and his aids were indefatigable. If the marriage certificate had been vigorously if privately sought, this was publicly demanded.

Mr. Hope Arlington showed his true colours, and they were not untarnished. Public opinion was dead against him, and that of judge and jury was supposed to run in the same current.

Justice triumphed for once in a way. The certificate was found in a small Parisian church, dated about a twelvemonth after that of the marriage ; and the birth and baptism were registered as Félicité Gabrielle Arlington, child of George and Félicité Arlington.

Maxwell gained his cause, and therewith such celebrity as established his fame as counsel, and Fay as heiress of Arlington Manor and the untold wealth of all the mortgages on the Oakwoods estate. Overwhelmed and scarcely understanding her good fortune, all she could say was, 'If the Manor is mine, the mortgages are Sir Gilbert's. I will not have them.'

'You must. Wait till you come of age,' said Maxwell.

So she waited.

Proposals of marriage showered in upon her. She refused them all, and Sir Gilbert suggested that she should have a printed form after the manner of the great Yorkshire heiress, to save the trouble of writing.

Mr. Hope Arlington had quitted the country, taking with him all the General's funded property, of which no one sought to deprive him. Aimée was the only being he left behind who pitied him. Her voice still quivered, and her pulses quickened, when they spoke unkindly of him. But Lizzie Maxwell followed her uncle's advice, and consoled herself. Mr. Dyce Pouncefort dawdled about as usual amongst the young ladies, affecting by turns Aimée, Fay, and Lizzie, but, finding the two former as indifferent as Elinor had been, returned to the latter, who was generally chartered as that questionable fact, his 'first love.' She was wise in her generation, and changed her tactics with statesman-like craft. She set to work to recover her lost looks and spirits, a task difficult but not impossible. Instead of grieving over spilt milk, she let fresh cream gather, and skimmed it. Her ladle had not to go deep, for it was thin cream enough ; but she secured it. Covering up the still unhealed sore, she called in Dawdling Dyce as a new doctor, and engaged him for life. Much to the satisfaction of her relatives, if slightly to the displeasure of Lady Clementina, she married him, and her uncle came down liberally with his thousands.

'The Moneypennys rule the land, and are indifferent to expense,' said Sir Gilbert.

He, Fay, and Aimée had been quietly settled at the Court since the conclusion of the trial, and would have been tolerably at ease but for Gilbert's silence. It was unaccountable: for his letters had hitherto been regular, if brief. Although his friends spoke cheerfully to one another, each feared mischance, believing that he would otherwise have fulfilled his promise of returning for Fay's twenty-first birthday. The preparations for this event were on a grand scale, and the tenants of the Manor intended to celebrate it by dinners and bonfires. But Fay would only have old friends at the Court, and no rejoicings. No one should imagine she was glad to be possessed of Sir Gilbert's property, which, she found, he was resolved to make over to her at once. She had heard much on this subject, but had been reticent herself. The 'you musts' of Sir Gilbert and Maxwell appeared to have convinced her.

Having thus rapidly sketched her story while she ruminates upon it, we must leave the remainder of this brightening October day to another chapter.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE LAST OF THE MORTGAGES.

WHEN Fay rises from her seat in the window, she kneels down at her little shrine. This is still the table covered with memorials of her dead parents, and the devotional books presented by her friends. She remains long at her prayers. Rising when they are completed, she says aloud,—

'I am of age. I will yet do great things;' and proceeds to dress in haste. Having accomplished this, she takes up her father's photograph, and murmurs, 'Twenty-one years ago, *mon père!*'

How grandly handsome she has become! The eyes seem more lustrous, the complexion brighter, the lips redder than ever. The lithe figure is formed, and the movements are easy and graceful. Yet there is still much of the child about her, in spite of her efforts to be womanly. She talks to her cat and portraits as of old; she impetuously rejects a new for an old dress, and informs Villy that 'she hates the novelties, and that he spoils them.'

'Of age!—what does it mean? I shall discover in my Bible,' she says suddenly, opening the sacred volume.

Her reading is interrupted by a knocking at the door, followed by—

'We must have the first kiss, and many happy returns,' in a well-beloved voice.

Elinor enters, holding by the hand a two-year-old, blue-eyed, blue-ribboned child.

'What, dressed already! We expected to find you in bed.'

'*Chérie!*' cries Fay, hurrying to meet Elinor, and embracing her warmly.

'Mayfay have pictures!' pleads a small voice; and in another moment Elinor's little girl is in Fay's arms.

'Your godchild brings you her own sweet self and her father and mother,' says Elinor, elegant and gentle as ever, and looking younger than when she married.

'I shall be wise, and a fairy godmother to my Aimée Félicité. What an angel she is!' cries Fay, kissing the child.

''Ook, Fay!' pleads the small voice, as soon as the rosy face is released; ''ook at the pitty pictures!' and the child holds up a gold locket and chain.

'My monogram in pearls and diamonds!' exclaims Fay.

'Oopen it,' says the child, still in Fay's arms.

Elinor obeys her new tyrant, and displays the contents of the locket. It contains small miniature photographs of herself, her husband, and little girl.

'Elinor! Mayfay! Monsieur Villy! I shall have you always!' cries enchanted Fay.

'Fasten it round the little godmother's neck, Mayfay,' says Elinor; and two chubby arms encircle Fay, with a make-believe attempt to clasp the chain.

When it is fastened, Fay dances round the room with the child, and finally dances down-stairs, followed by soberer Elinor, and Villy rubbing against the banisters. She and Mayfay no sooner reach the dining-room than they are surrounded by Sir Gilbert, Maxwell, and Aimée.

'Many happy and prosperous years to our Fay, though my white hairs bristle with age on this auspicious morn,' says Sir Gilbert, embracing Fay and his grandchild simultaneously.

''Ook, 'ittle dodmoder!' cries Mayfay, struggling for freedom, and pointing to a beflowered breakfast-table, and a begarlanded room.

'It is enchantment—fairyland!' exclaims Fay, with tears beginning to swell. 'Aimée, this is your work.'

'And Tom's, and the inimitable Stokes'. Behold that beatific vision of dainties,' says Sir Gilbert.

Fay puts down the struggling child, and goes towards the table, where, at her customary seat, is an elegant device in white chrysanthemums and laurustinus enshrining a gold bracelet. She unclasps a medallion, and finds photographs of Sir Gilbert and Aimée exquisitely painted.

'Now I have you all, except Boykin,' she says gently, and the gathering tears fall.

She sits down to conceal them.

'Don't ky, 'ittle dodmoder,' says Mayfay, pulling at her skirt.

'Let me be your *preux chevalier*,' says Sir Gilbert gaily, taking up the bracelet and clasping it round her wrist; while Aimée's white arm encircles her neck, her golden hair touching her cheek.

'How can I thank you all for so many, many years?' she sobs.

'By no longer delaying breakfast, which is getting cold,' says phlegmatic Maxwell, catching up his little daughter.

'Ah, *mon fiancé*, you are ever dry as the law,' cries Fay, recovering her cheerfulness as suddenly as she lost it.

Breakfast passed gaily enough, and Fay grew as bright as she was handsome. When it was concluded, Maxwell requested her presence in the library, and Sir Gilbert joined them. He told her that, being of age, there were certain preliminaries to be settled and explained.

'It is wearisome, but I listen. You speak as dogmatically as Judge Markme, when he summed up and squinted at me,' said Fay.

'I am about to repeat much of what he said.'

'*Ma foi*, that is unnecessary; and I will tell you in five minutes what it took him and you five days to say. Don't be impatient, for I intend to be wise henceforth, and conduct myself as Minerva when she instructed the unfortunate Telemachus. He said that my father and mother were married, which we already knew; that took him one day. He said that I was my father's daughter and my uncle's niece; that included another. He was no conjurer, is it, Saar Gilbert?'

'No; but it was fortunate, nevertheless, that he proclaimed the fact,' laughed Sir Gilbert.

'He said that General Arlington was in his senses when he wrote the justest thing possible; behold a third day. He affirmed that the Manor descended to his next of kin—and what shall she do with it? Here pass two more; and he spent at least a sixth in elegant similes, anecdotes, and learned remarks on international laws. It was like the creation. I see him now, and you, Monsieur Villy, with wig, gown, and parchment-roll, wise as an owl. Permit me to rise and enact the scene.'

'Pray listen to me, Fay, or your trustees will arrive. I merely want to explain what you have to do, before they come,' said Maxwell.

'I know. I have to seal, sign, and deliver. Is not that forensically expressed?'

'I have to do that, Fay,' said Sir Gilbert gravely. 'I am about to tell Messrs. Moneypenny and Pouncefort that we have arranged to sell the property, and that they can buy it for you if they think fit. You must not interrupt the course of this transaction, for Gilbert is as resolute as I.'

'So! Then I shall have him under my thumb at last. He will not like it.'

She smiled strangely.

'You are aware that you become your own mistress to-day,' said Maxwell. 'Deeds of release are prepared for your trustees, and you enter into possession.'

'Then it is I, and not they, who have the right of purchase?' said Fay sharply.

'But we have the right of sale, and if you do not buy, another will,' said Sir Gilbert, with unusual decision.

'*Bien.* To-day, then, the mortgages are mine. I desire to see them.'

'They are only musty parchments, and you would not understand them,' replied Maxwell. 'If you would only be prepared to receive the trustees, and wind up the affairs as admirably as you wound up judge and jury, you would be acting wisely.'

'I am weary of such rusty mechanisms, in which my keys will not turn. I must see my property. I think you have transferred it from the Cottage to the Court; and as you say I am my own mistress, and you my counsel, agent, adviser, etc., etc., I request to examine all the mortgages of all the Oreburns and all the Arlingtons. The sooner you produce them the earlier I shall see my venerated trustees, to whom, as to every one else, I have given nothing but trouble. It is doubtless childish curiosity, but I wish to know how rich I am.'

'That is easily told. You have'—

'If you do not hasten, the gentlemen will arrive, and I shall make a scene,' interrupted Fay impatiently, rising and going towards a certain cupboard, in which she had seen Maxwell insert a key.

'You certainly are intensely childish,' he exclaimed angrily, rising also, and hurrying towards the said cupboard.

He took several bundles of parchment from a shelf, and laid them in silence on the library table

'These are absolutely mine?—the mortgages my uncle left me? They belong to no one else?' asked Fay, laying her hands on them.

'Absolutely yours,' replied Maxwell.

Then my father and I will examine together the tardy reparation of his only brother,' said Fay, gathering them up, and, with a glance at Sir Gilbert, hastily leaving the room.

'What will be the next phase? Not avarice, surely,' said Sir Gilbert, shrugging his shoulders.

She went to her room, and locked both its doors; then she sat down before her father's open photograph. She saw unconsciously that her table and room were adorned with fresh flowers, and murmured 'Dear Aimée!' She let the parchments fall at her feet, and considered a moment.

'Thou approvest, is it not, my father?' she said.

She took from her table a large pair of sharp scissors, belonging to Arbiter, which she had placed there for her purpose; then, picking up one bundle of parchments, snipped the pink tape that bound them together. Unfolding a deed, she muttered, '*Ma foi!* Monsieur Villy was right—they *are* musty!' Glancing at the stiff, clerkly writing, she added, 'What pains and loss of pen and ink to cause so much misery! This must have been signed centuries ago. I hope the spirits of the ancients are not in their deeds. But we believe not in spiritualism—is it, Villy? Yet I am glad thou art here, as I like not to be quite alone.'

Villy came purring towards her, and rubbed his back against the parchments.

'Thou also approvest: then we will begin.'

With determined face and action, she cut the deed in two, then proceeded to cut it up crosswise into small slips. The work was not easy, for the parchment was old and crumpled. She completed it, however, and then, picking up another and another, operated similarly upon them.

'If I spoil the scissors, I shall procure Arbitère new ones. How tough these ancients were! You have afforded me labour and pleasure, my poor uncle. I hope he dwells not now in the Court he coveted, but in the courts above. I trust I am not irreverent, as Aimée sometimes thinks me, but this hard labour requires amusement. It is worse than picking oakum.'

There was a ring at the hall-bell, the echo of which reached her.

'My trustees! How grand that sounds! I must hasten, or they will break open the door. If Gilbert were here, I would cause Stokes to ring all the bells again. That would be *malin*, but delicious. *Hélas!* he comes not!'

Her whispered reverie was interrupted by a knock at her door, and she heard Elinor's voice and the words, 'Fay, you are wanted. Mr. Pouncefort and Mr. Moneypenny have arrived.'

'Tell them I am engaged with my property, and I will meet them as soon as business permit,' she replied aloud; then continued to herself, 'That was well expressed for an heiress. I make progress, yet the parchments seem to grow. I have already a red rim round my thumb.'

She snipped and cut on till the luncheon-bell rang, and Aimée tapped at the other door.

'Do come down, dear Fay; you must be ready for luncheon to-day, at least.'

'I can eat none, angel. I am occupied with my uncle's birthday present. It is even more costly and interesting than the bracelet and locket. But proceed, and I will be down before my trustees conclude their repast.—That also was well said. If these parchments would but tear!'

She cut on perseveringly. The bundles diminished, and their remains covered the floor. Nearly an hour passed before a third knock came. It was Sir Gilbert.

'Let me in, Fay; you can complete your lection when the authorities have departed. We have finished luncheon.'

'Yet a few moments, and I am with you positively,' she said, cutting on. 'I can admit no one—not even you, for I consider attentively the legacy of my uncle.'

'His memory must be greener in your soul than mine, if you can pore over those odoriferous parchments,' retorted Sir Gilbert.

'It will be verdant and flowery till I die.—That, again, was poetically expressed. I believe this is the last deed but one,' she continued. 'I am thankful, for my fingers are sore—indeed, the flesh is disappearing beneath the steel; but what is that compared to the tortures my ancestors have inflicted on the Oreburn, or the ladies inflict on their dressmakers?'

She could, indeed, scarcely hold the scissors, but she picked up the last deed, and began upon it vigorously. Another knock, not gentle like Aimée's, or persuasive like Sir Gilbert's, but bold and decided. It was Maxwell.

'Fay, you must come. My uncle has another engagement, and he is irritable, as I am.'

'How uncomfortable he must feel! I come actually in ten minutes. I am in the middle of the final clause of the concluding mortgage. Of what good to be an heiress, if one is thus tormented? Make my compliments, and say I am at the service of my advisers immediately.'

Resolutely she cut up the last parchment; then, with a '*Dieu merci!* that is accomplished!' she rose, stretched her wrung hands and cramped legs, and stood in the midst of a wreck of parchments, pink tape, and broken seals. A large clothes-basket, borrowed from the laundry-maid, was at hand. She heaped the *débris* into it, pushing down restive shreds with 'I wonder not that they resist their fate;' then pausing on her knees to smile at the havoc she had made. She finally threw a white cloth over the basket, and said, 'Now I will face the company.'

She took it up with some difficulty, wondering 'how the washerwomen carried their burdens,' and went down to the library. She entered boldly, though her face was crimson. The four gentlemen were awaiting her impatiently, and her trustees greeted her with the usual formula of 'Many happy returns of the day.'

'A thousand thanks,' she rejoined. 'Excuse me an instant. I am of age, and must first dispose of my property. It has been on this account that I have kept you waiting, and I make a million apologies.'

'Are you going to market, Fay?' asked Sir Gilbert, with a ring of displeasure in his voice.

'No; I carry my clothes to dry,' she replied.

She walked gravely towards the fire. In the library and dining-room of the Court the old-fashioned fireplaces had been preserved, on account of the value and beauty of the carved cedar-work that surmounted and surrounded them. The fire was therefore on the hearth,' and Sir Gilbert always fed it himself from a heap of logs in the corner, which he called his 'only private property.' He had made, at Fay's particular request, a huge fire, and it was blazing half way up the chimney. She had said that she wished to have a private bonfire to celebrate her majority, and Sir Gilbert must make it, therefore the antique steel 'dogs' that guarded the hearth groaned under a weight of oaken logs unusual in October.

'We have a splendid bonfire, Saar Gilbert,' she said. 'I will burn all the trash of centuries in it, and celebrate my birthday by what they call a holocaust.'

She uncovered her basket quickly, and threw the contents on the fire. She stood a moment to assure herself that they were, for the most part, at least, in the centre of the flames, then turned round and faced the gentlemen. They were watching her with amused curiosity, little imagining the value of her sacrifice. Her pulses were beating with excitement; but she restrained the expression of it. Only by the flushed face and nervous movement of the tired hands did she show that she had done anything unusual.

'My friends, I relieve you and myself from much trouble and useless anxiety,' she resumed. 'To-day I am my own mistress, and I have destroyed the rubbish which has so long interfered with the welfare of my benefactors. There are the mortgages.'

She pointed to the fire, and before any one could speak, hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER LXIX.

SIR GILBERT'S WRATH.

WHEN Fay left the library and the burning parchments, she ran up the great staircase, taking two steps at once in her haste. She heard Sir Gilbert cry out, 'Fay, Fay, come back! What have you done?' and the others exclaim, 'The deeds! The mortgages! A hundred thousand pounds!' But she hurried to her room, seized a hat, ran down a back staircase, and was soon deep in a private path that led through the woods and park to the principal lodge.

'All the king's horses and all the king's men,
Will not put humpty dumpty together again,'

she sang, as she paused to take breath.

She clasped her hands and looked upwards. A sunbeam glanced upon her through the reddening trees, and, muttering, 'My Father in heaven approves,' she hastened on.

Two miles from the house, and not far from the lodge, was what she called 'one of her watch-towers,' whence she could see and not be seen. This was a seat in an old tree, that enabled her to overlook the somewhat dilapidated fern-covered park wall, and to get a view of the high road. She reached this, and clambered up to it. In former times she imagined herself King Charles in his sheltering oak, but now the words, 'He cometh not, she said,' rang in the ears of her mind. The ancient tree was partly shorn of its garments, and half its yellow leaves lay on the red bracken and tinted path beneath. Still she was concealed from observation.

She sat long in her bower, now listening to the sound of wheels, now to the thrush and blackbird, anon watching the squirrels leap from branch to branch. She could see the gables of the old stone lodge, and the spread eagles that surmounted the pillars of the great gates, through the trees; and she could hear if a carriage either stopped or drove through the park. The pulsation of her heart quickened, and the colour flushed her face, when, from time to time, she saw vehicles drive past her observatory, and knew that they also drove past the gates. Various well-worn phrases and proverbs haunted her, and in her excitement she wished her beloved fairy-lore extinct. 'Jack in the bean-stalk,' 'Sister Ann, Sister Ann, do you see anybody coming?' 'A forlorn hope,' 'Caliban shrieking from his tree-trunk,' tormented her, while she was straining eyes and ears to see and listen.

The echoes of the village bells, pealing in her honour, reached her; and she frequently heard herself named by passers-by, probably on their way to or from Manorial festivities. Now it was, 'Ma'mselle won't be there herself. She's Miss Arlington. Who'd a' thought it? I hope she'll be a good mistress.' Anon, 'How could Sir Gilbert rejoice when he be as good as sold up? He's a gen'leman of the right sort,' and so on. Songs and laughter alternated, and the people were merry, if she was not.

The sunbeams were beginning to slant westward, and the breezes to blow cool, when she saw the omnibus pass. She said, sighing wearily, 'He will not come by omnibus—he would take a cab at the station.' It stopped at the gates, however, and she thought that the tiresome fish expected for dinner had arrived. She wished that Sir Gilbert had not persisted in inviting a party on her account. Then she remembered that if the omnibus had brought the fish, the train must be in, and *if* he came, his conveyance would follow. '*If!*' How absurd she was! He would have arrived days ago.

Her glances shot down the road, and pierced the extreme distance. Her hearing grew acute as a wild Indian's, but neither sight nor sound availed. She was just conscious that the omnibus drove on in the contrary direction, and that was all. She was suddenly startled by a rustling of leaves in the walk. She looked towards the lodge, and saw a man approaching her tree. She shrank back, lest he should see her, but his head was bent downwards. As he drew near, she glanced through the branches, and gazed intently for a moment. Then she uttered a shrill cry, and he looked up.

'Gilbert!'

'Fay!'

He has come. She has not watched in vain. She is at his side, her hand in his; but, overpowered by joy and shame, she cannot speak, she dares not look at him. He appears just as agitated. Both remember their parting, but neither knows what the other thinks, for three years have passed since that day, and no allusion has been made to it. After long silence, he says, trying to see her face beneath the drooping eaves of her hat,—

'I have fulfilled my promise, but you are not glad.'

Jealous and doubting still!

'I am! I am!' she cries.

'Then look at me.'

She lifts her radiant face and gleaming eyes to his, and starts.

'Gilbert, what is it?' she asks, in sudden alarm.

'I have been ill, that is all; but I am here.'

'Thou hast been ill and alone! Oh, *mon ami!*'

The tone, the look, reaches his heart.

'Child! darling!' he murmurs. Then, as if remembering something, he adds hurriedly, 'Let us go on, dear Fay.'

They walk side by side through the rustling leaves, beneath the sun-gilded trees. She speaks first, after long silence, looking at him with tears in her eyes.

'Were you so ill that you could not write? Why are you so pale and thin? Tell me all—all.'

'It is not much. I was struck down by fever, and lay long at the point of death. I was far from a doctor, far from communication with the outer world, but my people, and a good constitution, by God's mercy, got me through. When I recovered strength and sense, I knew that I had barely time to reach you on this day. I left my affairs in the hands of my trusty friend, Mason, of the Great Oaks; and young Roberts insisted on going with me to Buenos Ayres, and seeing me on board. And here I am.'

'You will never—never go back again?'

'We will not talk of that on this first day. I have not wished you joy. I know I have not congratulated you as I ought on your successful cause, your wealth, and ensured position. I tried to write it, and failed, for I was not glad.'

'Not glad!—why?'

'Because I am poor, you rich.'

'Not so. You are wealthier than I. Come and see.'

Their eyes meet, and Fay's, as usual, droop before his. He changes the subject to inquiries for all at home. Fay quickens her steps. He looks fearfully ill and altered. Even his bright, dauntless eyes are dim.

'How selfish we are to be slow when we can make them so happy,' she says.

'You are changed, and yet the same,' he remarks. 'Why were you in your watch-tower on such a day as this, when all the world is talking of the majority of Miss Arlington, the great heiress?'

'I was watching for you, and you came,' she replies simply. 'I shall restore you to them again. What joy! Only you are so changed. Oh, Gilbert, how ill you must have been!—how ill you are! But we will nurse you well again. You shall never, never go back!'

When they reached the house by a side entrance, they hear a confusion of voices; but Fay, avoiding contact with the speakers, leads the way to the hall. Doors are open everywhere, and there is a strong smell of burning.

'Has there been a fire?' asks Gilbert.

'Yes—a bonfire in honour of your return,' she replies.

As they near the library, Sir Gilbert's voice reaches them. It is sharp, loud, and angry.

'I say she must be found, sir, do you hear? Send every one in search,' are his words, as Tom appears in the hall, speechless with surprise at such unusual wrath.

Seeing Fay, he exclaims,—

'I am glad you are come, miss. Master wants you. Lord a' mercy! Is that Mr. Oreburn or his ghost?'

'Hush!' whispers Fay; while Gilbert shakes hands with Tom, and assures him of his mortal state.

'I say that I will have every deed drawn again, each mortgage reproduced. I will sell the property to-morrow and make over every farthing of it. Do you take me for a robber?'

This from Sir Gilbert in high, disdainful tones, as they pause a moment before the library door, and see him, hat in hand, standing excited before Elinor and Aimée. Maxwell lays his hand on his shoulder and is about to speak, when Fay tells Gilbert to go in first, for she is afraid.

He enters, and she remains a moment in the hall, her face paling before Sir Gilbert's anger. Aimée, seeing Gilbert first, meets him with a glad cry. They all surround and welcome him except his father, who keeps aloof, and scarcely gives them time to remark the change in his appearance, or to express their joy at his return.

'You come to witness and share our disgrace. That is Fay's work,' he says in haughty displeasure, pointing to the smouldering shreds of parchment that have escaped the flames.

Gilbert looks round inquiringly, then, going to his father, says, 'Will you not shake hands with me, father? It is long since we met.'

Sir Gilbert grasps his son's hand without looking at him. 'Our name has been at least honourable hitherto, it will now be a by-word for dishonour,' he groans. 'I thought she loved us better.'

'Oh, say not that! I love you better than my life,' cries Fay, running into the room and throwing her arms round Sir Gilbert.

But he puts her coldly from him. She turns appealingly to Gilbert, who asks her what it means. She answers wildly, beseechingly, looking from one to the other of her bewildered friends.

'I have but destroyed the mortgages, for his sake and yours. They are not mine, and shall I possess what is rightfully another's? The property of my benefactors? Shall I stand in his place and yours—my father, sisters, brother? Say, Gilbert, Elinor, Aimée, Monsieur Villy? Will no one speak? May I not be once more your wilful, spoilt Fay; but oh! not the heiress?'

Gilbert takes the outstretched appealing hand and clasps it firmly; but Sir Gilbert stays the words that rise to his lips.

'Fay, you have stamped me and mine as robbers to all future ages!' he cries in his excitement. 'You have repaid our small service to you by making our name vile. What will the world justly say of us? That we have nurtured you, detained you amongst us till you are of age to act, then allowed you to destroy what comes to you from generations of your ancestors. I would rather have taken pistol in hand and robbed on the world's highway than this should have been. You, who were confided to me by a dead friend! Truly, were the General here, he might justly call me coward.'

'Saar Gilbert! *mon bien aimé!* it was for you I asked; to you he left the mortgages. Forgive me if I have offended you!' cries Fay, clasping her hands in entreaty.

'Never, until a deed is drawn, conveying to you again what you have destroyed. Prepare it, Maxwell, and let all here present witness it, as well as every inmate of the Court. We will then hide our poverty and shame with Gilbert in America. You dare not refuse me this compensation.'

Fay glances from father to son. The one seems mad with indignation, the other calm with repressed feeling. She shrinks towards the latter, who lays his hand on her shoulder and whispers,—

'Have patience, Fay.'

But she has no patience. She takes her stand close to him, and pours forth her reply. Her figure and speech rise together in dignity.

'Saar Gilbert, I will never sign, or receive a deed that shall convey to me one acre of your land, or one *sou* of your money. On the contrary, I shall leave the Manor to you and yours. I am of age, and cannot be controlled. I have not heard the jargon of the lawyers in vain ; for I know that I am my own mistress, and cannot be compelled to mend what I have rightfully destroyed ; and, *grâce à Dieu*, that would be impossible.' She points to the fireplace. 'Madame *ma grand'mère* will receive me, if you reject me. I shall be *ennuyée*, and you may, perhaps, miss me a little, but that is unimportant. I shall be careless of my fate, if I feel that you possess your rights.'

Her voice falters slightly, and Aimée and Elinor repress their sobs. Maxwell looks perplexed, and ventures a few intercessory words.

'It can easily be arranged, Sir Gilbert. Women are scarcely responsible in business matters. One sees it more every day. When the trustees return we will settle it.'

'I am responsible, if they are not,' is Sir Gilbert's cold rejoinder. 'Perhaps my son will say something to show that he also feels how much we are dishonoured ?'

He glances at Gilbert, and starts at the change in him, of which he suddenly becomes conscious.

'I think Fay has acted nobly, if rashly, father, and will stake my life on her generosity and truth,' says Gilbert calmly.

'I thought you, at least, were a gentleman !' exclaims his father, walking rapidly towards the door.

Fay intercepts his exit, crying out,—

'Oh, Saar Gilbert, I knew not before how cruel you could be ! Look at Gilbert, and unsay those unkind words. Be cold to me if I have offended you, but oh, not to him, after three long years !'

She lays her hand on his arm, but he shakes it off. His daughters come forward with entreaties, but he even puts them away, and passes from the room.

'What shall I do—what can I say ?' cries Fay, turning from one to the other. 'He will never forgive me, yet I have acted right. Will you be my friend, Gilbert ? Will you still be my advocate, Monsieur Villy ! I have the conscience clear, and would rather go by dale and down, like the Lady Clare, than be clad in the satins and diamonds of my benefactors. He has never before given me an unkind word or look, but has been gentle and chivalrous as a romance-knight. My friends, what shall we do ?'

They all surround her, assuring her of sympathy, and expressing regret. Aimée whispers, 'Pray, and all will be well ;' while Elinor proposes to follow her father.

'I will go—alone, if I may. It is well no one but he said I was not a gentleman,' interrupts Gilbert, and leaves the room, with a burning spot on his pale cheek.

CHAPTER LXX.

THAT—WAS—NOT—LOVE.

GILBERT followed his father to a room in the East Wing, which he had appropriated to himself. He found him pacing up and down excitedly.

'This is a cold reception, father, after three years' absence,' he began,—'or, I might say, a hot one. You said I was not a gentleman. I hope I have never lost that distinction through all my servile work.'

'No gentleman would uphold the spoiler of a father's honour,' said Sir Gilbert bitterly. 'It has been already cast in my teeth, before the world, that I have maintained the orphan from interested motives, and, by Heaven, they may say it now with justice!'

'Never, sir. It was only the sneer of an adverse party. I read it, and laughed to think it was pointed at you, whose carelessness of wealth has become a by-word. But I still maintain that Fay has done nobly; and you will acknowledge it when you are yourself again.'

'*I* am not her lover,' uttered Sir Gilbert sarcastically.

'I am, and am not ashamed to avow it,' replied the son hotly.

'I wish you joy of your will o' the wisp. She has led scores astray since you left us; but the born coquette lures, and is never caught.'

Gilbert winced, yet spoke with decision.

'Then I will either share their fate or secure her. You may be blind to the dignity and gratitude of the sacrifice she has made, but I see in it the proofs of a grand unselfishness and devotion that would ennoble a peasant.'

'You would scarcely crown our disgrace by asking in marriage the heiress of our property?'

'I would, and will, and demand your sanction as my father and her guardian. Thanks to her devotion, Oakwoods is now yours.'

'Mine, sir! I beg you will not assert that again.'

'Father, hear me, at least. It has been the dream of your children's life to see you restored to your position and property, free from debt and dishonour—let me speak—I repeat, dishonour. We have all laboured for this end—God knows I have done what I could; if I have well-nigh failed, it is because fate and fortune have been against me. I have not led a wandering, rough life by choice, but in the hope of earning wealth sufficient to buy back our own. In my last resolute venture I lost strength of limb, but not of will. Under God, that saved me, I could not die apart from you, my sisters, and—Fay.'

Sir Gilbert looked at the young man, whose voice quivered. He saw how ill he must have been, and he knew that he spoke the truth. But the demon of pride possessed him, and he, the kindest of men, continued the cruellest. It is sometimes so when the dormant passions of the careless are roused.

'Your reproaches are just,' he answered, turning his back on his son, and going to the window. 'I have been an indifferent father, yet have I loved my children fairly well. One blood stirs in the current of our veins, and we could therefore live and die for one another. But hitherto the Arlington stream has run counter, and never befouled ours.'

'Oh, father, remember that you have hitherto reckoned Fay amongst your children, even though an Arlington.'

'I remember. Also I apprehend that you desire that I should repay you for the sacrifices you have made on my account, by that of my honour. I will no longer stand in your way; I relinquish the management of this matter to you, and, abdicating in your favour such share as I have in the property, will retire from the world with such allowance as you shall make me. You will accept the benefits I neither desire nor deserve, and run the chance of following your benefactor's discarded suitors!'

Sir Gilbert's tone and manner were so bitterly sarcastic that his son, weakened by illness and travel, sat down, and, covering his face, groaned audibly. Sir Gilbert turned hastily. The decided, fiery, proud, stedfast son, of whom he was at heart so proud, was stung by his words, and writhed beneath their lash. He stood in the window to look at him, the flickering light playing round him. How thin and bent his strong, stalwart figure seemed!—and how toil-worn he looked! The father's heart relented, but the pride remained. He went to him and touched his shoulder.

'Gilbert,' he said.

The young man looked up.

'Come, and I will make this sacrifice you demand.'

Without waiting a reply, Sir Gilbert left the room and returned to the library in search of Fay. But she was not there. While he and his son had been together, she had been in her room, now remorsefully praying, now indignantly protesting. Elinor found her on her knees when she went in search of her.

'Fay, darling, you must compose yourself; the people will be here directly,' she said.

'I cannot go down to dinner; you must make my excuses,' murmured Fay, rising slowly. 'I am not of those who have one face for tears, and another for smiles; I should disgrace you all.'

'Look at this new dress—these flowers from the Castle,' remonstrated Elinor, pointing to an elegant fabric of white, outspread on the bed, and to a profusion of choice flowers.

'I have no pleasure in them; I should be acting a farce to wear them. I cannot put them on.'

'Our friends come on your account. What will they think? Father will be himself with his guests; and when they are gone, you can'—

Elinor paused.

'What can I?' asked Fay passionately. 'I have done my duty; I can do no more. He will never forgive me, yet would I do it again to-morrow; and I can never be happy again until he has forgiven me. The sun of my life sets with his displeasure.'

'Dear Fay, you have acted well; he will acknowlege it yet. Let me dress you, I entreat. Think how far we have all come to celebrate this day! Remember that your poor *fiancé* has left London on purpose. Think, before all, of Gilbert. How ill he looks!—yet he has come.'

Fay's countenance changed; her face flushed, and she smiled. Elinor seized what she deemed an advantage, and continued,—

'You cannot disappoint one who has done so much, and loves you so well. For his sake be ready, at least. Let me help you. You must look your best to welcome him.'

Elinor began to unfasten Fay's dress, and she submitted.

'He understands me,' she said, as she threw off one thing after another, hastily and irritably.

She was dressed as if by magic; but when Elinor selected some flowers for her hair, the woman's instinct was aroused, and she said naïvely,—

'Not those—they are not becoming; I prefer the crimson rose and the maidenhair.'

In a moment she had, as it were, thrown flowers into her hair, and fastened them into her dress, while Elinor clasped the bracelet on her arm, and the locket round her neck—her presents of the morning. She looked a queen.

'You used to give us all flowers, darling, and adorn Aimée and me,' resumed Elinor cunningly. 'If I am not quite too old, put something in my hair.'

A pink-and-white camellia was instantly transported to Elinor's fair head, who perceived that Fay forgot for the moment her grief in the accustomed act.

'That is perfect!' she exclaimed. 'Another in your dress, a touch of fern, and you are my own *ma mie* again.'

She threw her arms round Elinor, who, fearing another outburst, begged her not to forget Aimée. She took up her flowers, and carried them to Aimée's room. Elinor followed. They found Aimée on her couch, ready for dinner, but looking pale and anxious. Arbiter was with her. When Fay appeared in her radiant beauty, Arbiter rose, and made her a profound curtsey.

'You are not also angry?' said Fay, astonished.

'Angry, Miss Arlington!' returned Arbiter. 'Every inmate of this house is ready to fall down and worship you. We think you have acted on your coming of age like a born lady as you are, and we wish you every happiness. If I have not always demeaned myself as I ought towards you, I humbly ask your pardon. I acknowledge my mistakes when I know them.'

'Is this truly yourself?' cried Fay, offering her hand to Arbiter, hitherto her open foe.

'Surely myself, Ma'mselle,' said Arbiter, curtseying again, and leaving the room.

This triumph was even stranger than Sir Gilbert's displeasure.

'Elinor bids me fasten these into your hair,' said Fay to Aimée.

As she spoke, the hall-bell rang, and the door of Aimée's room opened simultaneously. They all started, and exclaimed, 'Here they are, and no one is ready!' while Sir Gilbert and his son came in. Fay stood abashed at Aimée's side, a white rose in her hand. She did not dare to look at Sir Gilbert; but the flowers, Elinor's familiar words, and Arbiter's apology, had turned away her fear of him. When he came near, without noticing his haughty manner or compressed lips, she said, with the simplicity of a child,—

'Saar Gilbert, forgive me. I will never offend you again—indeed, I meant only to give you pleasure.'

'Gilbert, it is for you to speak,' said Sir Gilbert coldly, motioning to his son. 'I trust you may retrieve my lost honour.'

Gilbert came to Fay's side. His face had recovered its natural expression, though it was sadly attenuated.

'Fay, I have told my father that I love you, and am not ashamed to ask you, in his presence, to be my wife, even though you are rich and I am poor,' he said with emotion. 'You are far nobler than I, for I have been a jealous fool, you a true-hearted woman! Tell him, tell my father, that I do not love in vain.'

Cheeks aflame and eyes alight turned suddenly on Sir Gilbert, while a hand, holding a white rose, was given to his son.

'Enough!' said Sir Gilbert in a hoarse voice, his countenance softening slightly.

The hall-bell rang again.

'Elinor, Aimée, our guests arrive, and there is no one to receive them,' he added. 'Go down, and say I will be with them immediately.'

He held the door open for his daughters. They obeyed mechanically, exclaiming, as they passed out, and he followed,—

'Father, dear father, what has she done?'

Gilbert and Fay were left alone.

'Say you love me, whatever the end of this strange misconception—say you will be my wife,' said Gilbert.

'I do—I will,' was Fay's answer.

Once again he put his arms round her and kissed her—oh, how

‘Oh, Saar Gilbert, you will not even look at me!’—*Page* 412.

tenderly! For the moment they forgot all else but each other. Then Gilbert looked into her face, crimsoned with blushes, and, doubting, jealous still, asked,—

'Is it pity, or is it love?'

'Oh, Gilbert, why should I pity you, who are so strong? I have pitied others, but'—

She paused, and the grand head drooped. He spoke.

'Fay, I have loved you from the first, but you—forgive me, I must know all—you loved another?'

'That—was—not—love,' murmured Fay, pausing on each word, and plucking at the rose in her bosom.

'Then why did you call him *fiancé?*'

'Because we were affianced since our first acquaintance.'

'Why were you so changed by the engagement, and overcome at the wedding?'

'Because you all misdoubted me and believed that I loved Monsieur Villy, and because you avoided me. I thought you hated me, Gilbert. Ah! that was not kind. Saar Gilbert alone understood me. Saar Gilbert! And we forget that he is displeased. *Mon Dieu*, soften his heart for both our sakes. I go in search of him. I am no longer happy.'

'Fay, I believe you love him best.'

'I do, I do; but, *mon ami*, thou hast been ever in my heart.'

She left Gilbert, and went out on the landing. She was met by Maxwell, who had come in search of her and Sir Gilbert. He had his little girl in his arms.

'Pray go down, Fay. Dinner has been waiting an hour. We have worn out your incendiarism and Gilbert's return; and the ladies are tired of admiring Mayfay. Your trustees are whispering together, and Miss Whiston is listening. Pray be sensible, and don't give her any more of the alcohol of gossip before dinner, or she will lose her appetite.'

'Has Sir Gilbert gone down?'

'No; but he is ready.'

'Descend, and I follow.'

Before Maxwell could answer, she had darted down the corridor and planted herself at Sir Gilbert's door. The passage was dark, and when Sir Gilbert appeared, a candle in his hand, he did not at first perceive her, and was about to pass her by. She uttered a little cry, and fell on her knees.

'Oh, Saar Gilbert, you will not even look at me!'

In another moment Gilbert was at her side, and she knelt between father and son. A vision of a figure kneeling in the dark, outside that same door, when a friend was passing away within, crossed Sir Gilbert's mind. Momentary as it was, it dispersed the clouds.

'Fay, *ma petite!*' he said instinctively.

'He forgives me! Gilbert, he forgives me!' she cried.

Her arms were first round his knees, then encircling his neck.

'Take her, Gilbert. Settle it as you will, and may God bless you. Fay, be a better wife than I have been a father. You will now be indeed our own; but you little know the mischief you have done.'

CHAPTER LXXI.

AN END AND A BEGINNING.

THE guests are weary of waiting, and Elinor and Aimée feel that they fail to entertain them. Conversation has lapsed into expectation, and even Miss Whiston is silent. They have discussed the conflagration and Gilbert's return, and worn threadbare Fay's majority; they are hungry, and want their dinner. Hope dawns with a movement of the door-handle, and all eyes are turned towards the door. They are not turned in vain. Sir Gilbert enters, with Fay leaning on his arm, and followed by his son—Sir Gilbert easy, as if nothing had happened; Fay radiant in dress and beauty, but with tears in her lustrous eyes; Gilbert pale and in travelling attire, with the light of joy in his face.

'We have to make a thousand apologies,' begins Sir Gilbert. 'But when a young lady plays the heroine, a young gentleman the hero, and their antique guardian the unnatural tyrant, what can be expected but dangerous delays and spoilt dinner? The play is, however, played out, and ends happily, as all dramas should. Lady Clementina, allow me to take you in to dinner.'

Eight couple speedily leave the well-lighted drawing-room, file through the old hall, and enter the huge dining-room. Gilbert, regardless of etiquette, secures Fay, and sits by her. His father clears off the frowns of long expectancy by the assurance that the 'fish has been preserved by his princess of cooks *à merveille*,' and appetites are satisfied, and conversation returns. Fay is the only one who can neither speak nor eat.

'Talk to them, Gilbert, *mon ami*, for I cannot,' she whispers; and he, forgetful of fatigue, obeys.

Sir Gilbert, as host, sets every one at ease; Aimée, as hostess, strives to be agreeable, but can only wonder how it has all ended; while both inaugurate their life-long union. Elinor manages to whisper to her brother, and to receive the customary 'All right' in reply. And so the dinner passes off well, in spite of the inauspicious commencement.

They return to the good but obsolete custom of health-drinking in Fay's honour, and she nearly breaks down when they toast her twenty-first birthday; but Gilbert presses her hand, and whispers that it is the happiest day of his life, which raises a blush and smile, but is answered by the question,—

'Has Saar Gilbert really forgiven me?'

When the ladies are again in the drawing-room, Fay is overpowered with questions and congratulations. Shy, almost for the first time, she has still no words; she is thinking of Gilbert and his love—wondering if Sir Gilbert will be to her again as he has ever been.

She does not wonder long. When the gentlemen come in, he goes at once to her, and, putting her arm in his, tells her that it may be as well to forestall gossip by publicity, and that he is going to introduce her as his real daughter. She shrinks, and looks at him inquiringly.

'Have you quite forgiven me, Saar Gilbert?' she asks mistrustfully.

'Gilbert shall tell you, *ma petite*,' he replies, and the old smile beams.

Her face lights up with joy, and her lover, who is watching her, sees it.

'Then am I your spoilt Fay again?' she cries, with her old childish vivacity.

He leads her, without seeming to do so, from one to another of his guests.

'Mrs. Moneypenny, can you bear the weight of a new niece?' he asks, pausing before that lady, who is magnificent in diamonds, marabouts, and laces. 'We shall soon have another wedding, and I another daughter.'

'What do you mean, Sir Gilbert? Is your son going to be married? I hope he hasn't left his heart in America?'

'It appears that it has been in Fay's possession—at least, he says so, and I trust she believes it—eh, Fay?'

'Well, I am delighted!' exclaims Mrs. Moneypenny, taking Fay's disengaged hand. 'Another niece!—I should think I could bear the weight. My dear child, what a blessing you have been to us all! If it hadn't been for you, Willie would have never seen Elinor, and we should never have been friends. Septimus Hope would have had the Manor, and everything; and now all is as it should be—for, between ourselves, Mr. Moneypenny has left the Castle to Willie, though he has given me strict orders not to tell. And it is all through you, my dear.'

'You mistake, good Mrs. Moneypenny. It is because God rewards Saar Gilbert for his kindness to the poor orphan,' rejoined Fay.

'We will draw the parallel of worth to-morrow,' interrupts Sir Gilbert. 'We attract attention. Let us pursue our course of announcement. Miss Whiston is dying for the secret. Ah, Miss Whiston! You have heard what a burning we have had? The smoke of it clings to me still. Fay, wishing to propitiate me, makes me a costly present indeed—a wedding present, though I am not the bridegroom. Gilbert, come and tell Miss Whiston all about it.'

'I know very well already, Sir Gilbert,' exclaims Miss Whiston cheerfully. 'Mr. Oreburn has come home to fulfil his engagement with Mademoiselle. I always said he would.'

'Indeed, we were not engaged,' cries Fay eagerly.

'Let Gilbert explain. He is fond of Miss Whiston!' whispers Sir Gilbert maliciously.

'Ah, it is delicious! I conquer, for he has to confide in her after all. Look how grandly he performs his part!' cries Fay, who is herself again.

'Lady Clementina, I am to have another daughter-in-law. All the young ones marry and leave us. It is sad work when one is growing grey. We shall have a liberal Lady of the Manor, Mrs. Tenderton, and no lack of broth and blankets. Vicar! we will have a royal wedding this time. Our naughty Fairy showers wealth upon us, and we will distribute it largely. My son has also an open hand. I am to be ever the debtor, you see, Mr. Moneypenny. I strive to wear my obligations lightly; but I am proud of my daughter-in-law; and, Gilbert'—

'*De grâce*, hush, Saar Gilbert!' interrupts Fay, while, by degrees, all the party surround her.

'Inscrutable are the workings of Providence!' murmurs Mr. Tenderton, as he and Aimée stand apart surveying the scene.

'Strange but sure,' replies Aimée.

They do not separate till midnight, and congratulations, jests, and laughter are still heard as the carriages drive off. Sir Gilbert and his family stand under the colonnade to watch the last disappear. A round October moon looks down upon them, and they pause beneath her cold radiance. Woods, meads, river, and distant hills are steeped in light. The last flames of a bonfire are flickering on a hill nearer at hand, and Gilbert points to it with the whispered words,—

'In your honour, dearest.'

'And yours; for are you not come home for ever?' she rejoins. 'Oh, Saar Gilbert, are we not happy? We shall never part again.'

'Happy, *ma petite!*' ejaculates Sir Gilbert, startled from a momentary reverie. 'We should be happy, for assuredly the Lord crowns us with blessings. Let us count them up.'

Sir Gilbert is leaning against a pillar, his children surrounding him. Gilbert and Fay, hand in hand, on one side, Aimée on the other, Maxwell and Elinor, lovers still, near a second pillar opposite. With a sort of prevision, half earnest, half playful, Sir Gilbert speaks of the present and future.

'Never to part again, Fay? Let us see. Thanks to your impulsive love, I retain the home of my forefathers, unencumbered by debt. I pray to begin a new life, Aimée aiding me.'

'That is what my uncle said, to whom we owe all,' murmurs Fay, keeping close to Gilbert, whose arm steals round her waist.

'You become Lady of the Manor, and, compassionating Gilbert, exile and emigrant, but true son and lover, make him its lord, and yours.'

'Not mine!' whispers Fay to Gilbert maliciously.

'Then will there be space for friends, tenants, labourers—space and sustenance for all!' breaks in Gilbert emphatically.

'I hope so,' resumes his father. 'We must strive to redeem the past. We have our Lord Chancellor, prospective inheritor of the Castle, and Elinor, present possessor of the Cottage. Truly our responsibilities are great. I trust I may not regret my careless, irresponsible state, when Butterfield and Elinor tried to enforce prudence upon me. Aimée, darling, you must be your unworthy father's worthy helpmeet henceforth. Let us begin at once. We will have the wedding within this moon, shall we not, Fay? Then you can make *la grand'mère* happy by spending the honeymoon with her; and us, your serfs, happy by passing life with us.'

'Hush, dear Sir Gilbert! *De grâce*, Gilbert, *mon ami!*' interrupts Fay, blushing beneath the moon, and laying a hand on her friend's arm.

'Let it be so, darling,' whispers Gilbert.

'Then, God helping us, we will strive to help His poor,' continues Sir Gilbert. 'Our Fay is a good fairy, after all!'

His voice trembles, and his children all press round. Fay has one hand in his and one in Gilbert's.

'Twenty-one! A new life! And we have all made the peace!' she exclaims.

And so the curtain falls.

THE END.

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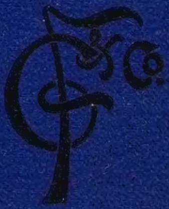
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